his body into submission, and making yoga an assault on his psyche, maybe he should cultivate these innate tendencies that led to *nirvana*, the "release of the mind" that was *nibbana*. He should foster helpful (*kusala*) states of mind, such as the disinterested impulse of compassion that had surfaced so naturally, and at the same time avoid any mental or physical states that would impede this liberation."[77]

Like the Jains, Gotama realized that the traditional five "prohibitions" of the "unhelpful" (*akusala*) states of violence, stealing, lying, intoxication, and sex must be balanced by their positive counterparts. Instead of merely avoiding aggression, he must behave gently and kindly to everything and everybody, and cultivate thoughts of loving-kindness. It was important not to lie, but also crucial to ensure that whatever he said was "reasoned, accurate, clear, and beneficial."[78] Besides refraining from stealing, he must rejoice in possessing only the bare minimum. From now on, he was going to work *with* his human nature and not fight against it. For the first time in months, he took solid food and started to nurse himself back to health. He also began to develop a special type of yoga. First came the practice of "mindfulness" (*sati*), in which, as a prelude to meditation, he scrutinized his behavior at every moment of the day, noting the ebb and flow of feelings and sensations, together with the fluctuations of his consciousness, and making himself aware of the constant stream of desires, irritations, and ideas that coursed through his mind in the space of a single hour. This introspection was not designed to induce a neurotic, self-regarding guilt. Gotama was simply becoming acquainted with the workings of his mind and body in order to exploit their capacities and use them to best advantage, in the same way as an equestrian seeks an intimate knowledge of the horse he is training.

Like many other renouncers, Gotama was convinced that life was *dukkha*, and that desire was responsible for our suffering. The practice of mindfulness made him even more acutely aware of the impermanence and transitory nature of human existence and of its countless frustrations and disappointments. It was not simply the big traumas of old age, sickness, and death that made life so unsatisfactory. "Pain, grief and despair are *dukkha*," he explained

later. "Being forced into proximity with what we hate is suffering; being separated from what we love is suffering; not getting what we want is suffering."[79] He also observed the way one craving after another took possession of his mind and heart, noticing how he was ceaselessly yearning to become something else, go somewhere else, and get something that he did not have. In this endless stream of desire, it seemed as though human beings were constantly seeking a new kind of existence—a new life, or rebirth. He could see it in his physical restlessness, the way he constantly shifted his position or set off for another part of the forest. "The world, whose very nature is to change, is constantly determined to become something else," he concluded. "It is at the mercy of change, it is only happy when caught up in the process of change, but this love of change contains a measure of fear, and this fear is itself *dukkha*."[80]

These were not simply logical reflections. Gotama was a very skilled yogin, and practiced this mindfulness with the disciplined concentration that enabled him to see these truths more "directly," without the filter of self-protecting egotism that distorts them. But he did not stop at contemplating these negative truths; he also fostered the more "skillful" (*kusala*) states while performing his yogic exercises, sitting cross-legged, and practicing the breathing rituals of *pranayama*. He was not only eliminating hatred from his mind, but making sure that it was also "full of compassion, desiring the welfare of all living beings." He was not only freeing himself of laziness and inertia, but cultivating "a mind that is lucid, conscious of itself, and completely alert." By systematically banishing one anxious thought after another, he found that his mind became "calm and still . . . had outgrown debilitating doubt," and was no longer plagued by "unprofitable [*akusala*] mental states."[81] If performed at sufficient depth, in the yogic manner, these mental exertions could, he believed, transform the restless and destructive tendencies of the unconscious and conscious mind.

In later years, Gotama claimed that this yogic mindfulness brought to birth a different kind of human being, one that was not dominated by craving, greed, and selfishness. He had almost killed

himself by undergoing excessive mortification, and was convinced that disciplined, systematically acquired compassion could take the place of the old punitive asceticism, and give the aspirant access to hitherto unknown dimensions of his humanity. Every day, while practicing yoga, he entered into an alternative state of consciousness, fusing each successive trance with a feeling of positive benevolence toward the entire world.

He called these meditations "the immeasurables" (*appamanā*). At each stage of his yogic journey into the depths of his mind, he deliberately evoked the emotion of love—"that huge, expansive and immeasurable feeling that knows no hatred"—and directed it to the four corners of the world, not omitting a single plant, animal, friend, or foe from this radius of sympathy. It was a fourfold program. First, he cultivated a disposition of friendship for everything and everybody. Next he learned to suffer with other people and things, empathizing with their pain, as he had felt compassion for the grass shoots and insects under the rose apple tree. In the third phase of his meditation, he summoned up a "sympathetic joy" that delighted in the happiness of others, without envy or sense of personal impairment. Finally, when he entered the deepest trance of all, so immersed in the object of his contemplation that he was beyond pain or pleasure, Gotama aspired to an attitude of total equanimity toward others, feeling neither attraction nor antipathy. This was extremely difficult, because Gotama had to divest himself completely of the egotism that constantly looks to see how other things and people might benefit or detract from the self. Where traditional yoga had built up in the yogin a state of impervious autonomy, Gotama was learning systematically to open his whole being to others, and thus transcending the ego in compassion and loving-kindness to all other creatures.[82] When these positive, skillful states were cultivated with yogic intensity, they could more easily take root in the unconscious and become habitual. The "immeasurables" were designed to pull down the barricades that we erect between ourselves and others in order to protect our fragile egos. As the mind broke free of its ordinary, self-oriented constriction, it felt "expansive, without limits, enhanced, without hatred or petty malevolence."[83] If taken to the

very highest level, this yoga of compassion brought the aspirant the "release of the mind," or *nibbana*.[84]

We have no idea how long it took Gotama to recover his health and attain the supreme enlightenment after he had devised this regimen. The Pali texts give the impression that it was a speedy process, but Gotama himself explained that it could take as long as seven years to achieve this incremental transformation. Gradually, the aspirant would learn to live without the selfish cravings that poison our lives and relationships, and would become less affected by these unruly yearnings. As he became aware of the ephemeral nature of these invasive thoughts, it became difficult to identify with them, and he became increasingly adept at monitoring the distractions that deprive us of peace.[85] The texts depict Gotama attaining enlightenment in a single night, because they wanted to show the general contours of the process and were not interested in the historical details of the journey. But Gotama's enlightenment was, almost certainly, no instant "born again" experience. He later warned his disciples that "in this method, training, discipline and practice take effect by slow degrees, with no sudden perception of the ultimate truth."[86]

The traditional story has Gotama sitting down under a bodhi tree in a pleasant grove near the city of Uruvela, beside the Neranjara River. The Pali scriptures tell us that in the course of a single meditation, he gained an insight that changed him forever and was convinced that he had liberated himself from the cycle of rebirth.[87] But there seems little that is new in this insight, usually formulated as the Four Noble Truths. Most renouncers would have agreed with the first three: that existence was *dukkha*, that desire was the cause of our suffering, and that there was a way out of this predicament. The fourth truth may have constituted the breakthrough: Gotama claimed that he had discovered the path that leads from suffering and pain to its cessation in *nibbana*. This path, traditionally called the Noble Eightfold Path, was a plan of action, consisting of morality (the cultivation of the "skillful" states), meditation, and the wisdom (*panna*) that enabled the aspirant to understand Gotama's teaching "directly" through the practice of yoga and integrate it with his daily life. Gotama never claimed that the Noble

Truths were unique, but that he was the first person in this historical era to have "realized" them and made them a reality in his own life. He found that he *had* extinguished the craving, hatred, and ignorance that hold humanity in thrall. He *had* reached *nibbana*, and even though he was still subject to physical ailments and other vicissitudes, nothing could touch this inner peace or cause him serious mental pain. His method had worked. "The holy life has been lived out to its conclusion!" he cried triumphantly at the end of his meditation under the bodhi tree. "What had to be done has been accomplished; there is nothing else to do!"[88]

What was *nibbana*? The word, as we have seen, implies that Gotama, on achieving enlightenment, had been "snuffed out." After his enlightenment, he was often called the Tathagata ("gone"), implying that "he" was no longer there. But this did not mean personal extinction. What had been extinguished was not Gotama the man but the fires of greed, hatred, and delusion. By tamping out the "unhelpful" states of mind, the Buddha (as we must now call Gotama) had achieved the peace of complete selflessness. This was a state that those of us who are still enmeshed in the toils of egotism cannot begin to imagine. That is why the Buddha always refused to define *nibbana:* it would be "inappropriate" to do so, because there were no words to describe this state to an unenlightened person.[89] The Buddha would still suffer; he would grow old and sick like everybody else, but by assiduous meditation and ethical effort, he had found an inner haven, which enabled a man or woman who put this regimen into practice to live with pain, take possession of it, affirm it, and experience a profound serenity in the midst of suffering. Perhaps Socrates had discovered something similar through his lifelong discipline of passionate honesty, which made him capable of equanimity while undergoing an unjust execution. *Nibbana* was thus found within each person's inner being, and was an entirely natural state. It was a still center that gave meaning to life. People who lost touch with this quiet place within could fall apart, but once they had learned to access this oasis of calm, they were no longer driven hither and yon by conflicting fears and desires, and discovered a strength that came from being correctly centered, beyond the reach of selfishness.

The Buddha was convinced that though *nibbana* was not a supernatural reality, it was a transcendent state because it lay beyond the capacities of those who had not achieved this inner awakening. There were no words to describe it, because our language is derived from the sense data of our unhappy existence, in which we cannot conceive of a life entirely devoid of ego. In purely mundane terms, *nibbana* was "nothing," because it corresponded to no reality that we could recognize. But those who had managed to find this sacred peace discovered that they lived an immeasurably richer life.[90] Later monotheists would speak about God in very similar terms, claiming that God was "nothing" because "he" was not another being; and that it was more accurate to say that he did not exist, because our notions of existence were too limited to apply to the divine.[91] They would also claim that a selfless, compassionate life would bring people into God's presence. But like other Indian sages and mystics, the Buddha found the idea of a personalized deity too limiting. The Buddha always denied the existence of a supreme being, because an authoritative, overseeing deity could become another prop or fetter that would impede enlightenment. The Pali texts never mention brahman. The Buddha came from the republic of Sakka, far from the Brahminical heartlands, and may have been unfamiliar with the concept. But his rejection of God or gods was calm and measured. He simply put them peacefully out of his mind. To inveigh vehemently against these beliefs would have been an unskillful assertion of ego. The old gods sometimes played a part in his life. Mara, god of death, for example, sometimes appeared in the Pali texts as the tempter of the Buddha, advising him to take an easier path, almost as though he were an aspect of the Buddha's own mind.

Yet when the Buddha tried to give his disciples a hint of what *nibbana* was like, he often mixed negative with positive terms. *Nibbana* was the "extinction of greed, hatred and delusion"; it was "taintless," "unweakening," "undisintegrating," "inviolable," "non-distress," and "unhostility." It canceled out everything that we find unbearable. One of the most frequent epithets used to describe *nibbana* was "deathless." But positive things could be said of *nibbana* too: it was "the Truth," "the Subtle," "the Other Shore,"

"Peace," "the Everlasting," "the Supreme Goal," "Purity, Freedom, Independence, the Island, the Shelter, the Harbour, the Refuge, the Beyond."[92] It was *the* supreme goal of humans and gods alike, an incomprehensible serenity, and an utterly safe refuge. Many of these images are reminiscent of words later used by monotheists to describe their experience of the ineffable God.

In finding *nibbana*, the Buddha had achieved his goal, but this was not the end of his life and mission. At first he had simply wanted to luxuriate in this transcendent peace. It occurred to him that he should, perhaps, spread the good news, but he rejected the idea as too exhausting and depressing. His *dhamma* was too difficult to explain. Far from wishing to give themselves up, most people positively relished their attachments and would not want to hear this message of self-abandonment.[93] But then the god Brahma (a popular manifestation of the brahman in the eastern Ganges) decided to intervene. In the Pali text, he seemed, like Mara, to represent an aspect of the Buddha's own personality: at some buried level, Gotama realized that he simply could not neglect his fellow creatures. In a complete reversal of their usual roles, the god left his heaven, descended to earth, and knelt before the enlightened man. "Lord," he prayed, "please teach the *dhamma*. Look down at the human race, which is drowning in pain, and travel far and wide to save the world." The Buddha listened carefully, and the Pali text tells us that "out of compassion, he gazed upon the world with the eye of a Buddha."[94] This is an important remark. A Buddha was not one who simply achieved his own salvation, but one who could still sympathize with the pain of others. Compassion and loving-kindness directed to the four corners of the earth had brought him to enlightenment. Selfish withdrawal would violate the essential dynamic of his *dhamma*, which demanded that he return to the marketplace and become involved in the sorrowing world. A crucial part of the insight he had gained under the bodhi tree was that to live morally was to live for others. For the next forty-five years of his life, the Buddha tramped tirelessly through the cities and towns of the Ganges plain, bringing his teaching to gods, animals, men, and women.

The Buddha's first disciples were already renouncers, and one

of them was said to have achieved enlightenment during the Buddha's first sermon. The texts always described the process in the same way. As Kondanna listened to the Buddha expounding the Noble Truths, he began to experience the teaching "directly"; it "rose up" in him, as if from the depths of his own being, as though he recognized it, had always known it.[95] It was not long before young men from the *kshatriya* and Brahmin classes began to join the Buddha. *Vaishya* merchants were also attracted to his insistence upon self-reliance, and those who did not become monks often became lay followers and patrons. The Buddha's order (*sangha*) soon became a sizable sect. The monks spent hours each day practicing the Buddha's compassionate, mindful yoga, but they also had to teach the method to others. This was not a religion for the privileged elite, like the old Vedic rituals. It was "for the many." The monks often lived in parks in the suburbs of the cities, which made it easy for the townsfolk to consult them, and crowds of merchants, noblemen, and courtesans turned out to listen to the Buddha when he arrived in their region. But most of the time, the monks were on the road, traveling "for the welfare and happiness of the people, out of compassion for the world."[96]

One of the most popular ways of attaining *nibbana* was meditation on the distinctively Buddhist doctrine of *anatta* ("no self"). The Buddha did not believe that the eternal self (atman; *purusha*) was the supreme reality. The practice of mindfulness had made him aware that human beings were in constant flux; their bodies and feelings changed from one moment to the next. After systematically examining his shifting convictions, emotions, and perceptions an honest person had to conclude that none of these could be the self sought by so many of the renouncers, because they were so flawed and transitory: "This is not mine; this is not what I really am; this is not my Self."[97] But the Buddha went even further and denied the reality of a stable, "lowercase" self too. The terms "self" and "myself" were, he believed, mere conventions, since every sentient being was simply a succession of temporary, mutable states of existence. In our own day, some postmodernist philosophers and literary critics have come to a similar conclusion.

The Buddha liked to use metaphors such as a blazing fire or a rushing stream to describe the human personality. It had some kind of identity, but was never the same from one moment to the next. Unlike the postmodernist idea, however, *anatta* was not an abstract, metaphysical doctrine but, like all his teachings, a program for action. *Anatta* required Buddhists to *behave* day by day, hour by hour, as though the self did not exist. Not only did the concept of "self" lead to unskillful thoughts about "me" and "mine," but prioritizing the self led to envy, hatred of rivals, conceit, pride, cruelty, and—when the self felt threatened—violence. The Buddha tried to make his disciples realize that they did not have a "self" that needed to be defended, inflated, cajoled, or enhanced at the expense of others. As a monk became expert in the practice of mindfulness, he would no longer interject his ego into passing mental states, but would regard his fears and desires as transient, remote phenomena that had little to do with him. Once a monk had achieved this level of dispassion, the Buddha explained to his monks, he was ripe for enlightenment. "His greed fades away, and once his cravings disappear, he experiences the release of the mind."[98]

The texts tell us that when the Buddha's first disciples heard his explanation of *anatta,* their hearts were filled with joy and they immediately experienced *nibbana*. Why should they have been so happy to hear that the self that we all cherish did not exist? The Buddha knew that *anatta* could sound frightening. An outsider might panic, thinking, "I am going to be annihilated and destroyed; I will no longer exist!"[99] But the Pali texts show people accepting *anatta* with relief and delight. Once they lived as though the self did not exist, they found that they were happier and experienced the same kind of enlargement of being as they did when practicing the immeasurables. To live beyond the reach of hatred, greed, and anxieties about our status and survival proved to be liberating.

But there was no way of proving this rationally. The only way of assessing the Buddha's method was to put it into practice. He had no time for abstract doctrinal formulae divorced from action. A person's theology was a matter of total indifference to the Buddha.

Indeed, to accept a dogma on somebody else's authority was unskillful; it could not lead to enlightenment because it amounted to an abdication of personal responsibility. Faith meant trust that *nibbana* existed and a determination to realize it. He always insisted that his disciples test everything he taught them. A religious idea could all too easily become a mental idol, one more thing to cling to, while the purpose of the *dhamma* was to help people to let go. Even his own teachings must be jettisoned, once they had done their job. He liked to tell the story of a traveler who came to a great expanse of water and desperately needed to get across. But there was no bridge or ferry, so he cobbled together a raft and paddled over. But then, the Buddha would ask his audience, what should the traveler do with the raft? Should he decide that because it had been so helpful to him, he must load it onto his back and lug it around with him wherever he went? Or should he simply moor it and continue his journey? The answer was obvious. "In just the same way, monks, my teachings are like a raft, to be used to cross the river and not to be held on to," the Buddha concluded.[100] His task was not to issue infallible statements or satisfy intellectual curiosity, but to enable people to cross the river of pain and arrive at the "further shore." Anything that did not serve that end was irrelevant.

The Buddha had, therefore, no theories about the creation of the world or the existence of God. These topics were, of course, extremely fascinating, but he refused to discuss them. Why? "Because, my disciples, they will not help you, they are not useful in the quest for holiness; they do not lead to peace and to the direct knowledge of *nibbana*."[101] He told one monk who kept pestering him about cosmology to the detriment of his yoga and ethical practice that he was like a wounded man who refused medical treatment until he learned the name of the person who had shot the arrow, and what village he came from. He would die before he got this useless information. What difference did it make to learn that a God had created the world? Grief, suffering, and pain would still exist. "I am preaching a cure for these unhappy conditions here and now," the Buddha explained to his metaphysically inclined monk, "so always remember what I have not explained to you and the reason I have refused to explain it."[102]

The Buddha liked to keep explanations to a minimum. Like Socrates, he wanted the disciple to discover the truth within himself. This also applied to the laity. On one occasion, the Kalamans, a tribal people who lived on the northern bank of the Ganges, sent a delegation to the Buddha. One renouncer after another had descended upon them, they explained, but each one belittled the others' doctrines. How could they tell who was right? The Buddha replied that he could see why the Kalamans were so confused. He did not add to their perplexity by reeling off the Four Noble Truths, but held an impromptu tutorial. The Kalamans were expecting other people to tell them the answers, he explained, but if they looked into their own hearts they would find that they already knew the right way to live. Was greed, for example, good or bad? Had the Kalamans noticed that if somebody was consumed by desire, he was likely to steal, lie, or even to kill? Did not this type of behavior make the selfish person unpopular and, therefore, unhappy? And did not hatred and delusion also lead to pain and suffering? By the end of their discussion, the Kalamans found that they had indeed known the Buddha's *dhamma* all along. "That is why I told you not to rely on any teacher," the Buddha concluded. "When you know in yourselves that some things are helpful and others unhelpful, you should practise this ethic and stick to it, no matter what anybody else tells you."[103] He adapted a form of the meditation on the immeasurables to the laity to help them to acquire the skillful attitude described in an early Buddhist poem:

> *Let all beings be happy! Weak or strong, of high,*
> *middle or low estate,*
> *Small or great, visible or invisible, near or far away,*
> *Alive or still to be born—may they all be perfectly*
> *happy!*
> *Let nobody lie to anybody or despise any single*
> *being anywhere.*
> *May nobody wish harm to any single creature, out of*
> *anger or hatred!*
> *Let us cherish all creatures, as a mother her only*
> *child!*

May our loving thoughts fill the whole world, above,
below, across,—
Without limit; a boundless goodwill toward the
whole world,
Unrestricted, free of hatred and enmity![104]

If they behaved in this way and there was a future life, the Buddha concluded, the Kalamans might accumulate some good karma and be reborn as gods. But if there was no afterlife, their considerate, genial lifestyle might encourage others to respond to them in the same way. At the very least, the Kalamans would know that they had behaved well, which was always a comfort.[105]

The Buddha always entered into the position of the people that he was addressing, even if he did not agree with it. As always, compassion was the key. One of his lay followers was King Pasenadi of Kosala, who remarked one day that he and his wife had recently admitted to each other that nothing was dearer to them than their own selves. Obviously this was not a view that the Buddha could share, but he did not scold the king or launch into a discussion of *anatta*. Instead he asked Pasenadi to consider this: If he found that there was nothing dearer to him than himself, others must feel the same. Therefore, the Buddha concluded, "a person who loves the self should not harm the self of others."[106] This was his version of the Golden Rule. Laypeople could not extinguish their egotism as thoroughly as a monk, who was devoted to the task full-time, but they could use their experience of selfishness to empathize with other people's vulnerability. This would take them beyond the excesses of ego and introduce them to the essential value of compassion.

Toward the end of his life, King Pasenadi's wife died and he fell into a chronic depression. He took to driving around the countryside aimlessly, and one day discovered a park full of wonderful old trees. Alighting from his carriage, he walked among their enormous roots and noticed the way that they "inspired trust and confidence." "They were quiet; no discordant voices disturbed their peace; they gave out a sense of being apart from the ordinary world and offered a retreat from the cruelty of life." Looking at

these marvelous trees, the king immediately thought of the Bud-
dha, jumped into his carriage, and drove for miles until he had
reached the house where the Buddha—now an old man of
eighty—was staying.[107] For many of his contemporaries, the Bud-
dha was a haven of peace in a violent, sorrowful world. The search
for a place apart, separate from the world, and yet wondrously
within it, that is impartial, utterly fair, calm, and that fills us with a
confidence that, against all odds, there is value in our lives, was
what many people in the Axial Age sought when they looked for
God, brahman, or *nibbana*. The Buddha seemed to encapsulate this
in his own person. People were not repelled by his dispassion, nor
daunted by his lack of preference for one thing or person over an-
other. He does not seem to have become humorless, grim, or in-
human, but inspired extraordinary emotion in all who met him.
His constant, relentless gentleness, serenity, and fairness seemed to
touch a chord and resonate with some of their deepest longings.
Like Socrates and Confucius, he had become what Karl Jaspers
called a paradigmatic personality—somebody who exemplified
what a human being could or should be.[108] These luminaries of
the Axial Age had become archetypal models; imitating them
would help other people to achieve the enhanced humanity that
they embodied.

One day a Brahmin found the Buddha sitting under a tree
and the sight of his serenity, stillness, and self-discipline filled the
priest with awe. The Buddha reminded him of a tusker elephant:
there was the same sense of enormous strength and massive po-
tential brought under control and channeled into an extraordi-
nary peace. The Brahmin had never seen a man like that before.
"Are you a god, sir?" he asked. "An angel . . . or a spirit?" No, the
Buddha replied. He had simply revealed a new potential in
human nature. It was possible to live in this world of pain at
peace, in control, and in harmony with one's fellow creatures.
Once people had cut the roots of their egotism, they lived at the
peak of their capacity and would activate parts of their beings that
were normally dormant. How should the Brahmin describe him?
"Remember me," the Buddha told him, "as one who is awake."[109]

8

ALL IS ONE

(c. 400 to 300 BCE)

By the fourth century, the economic and political transformation of China was progressing at astonishing speed. The wars continued and the princes needed to fund their expensive campaigns, so they encouraged the development of the new mercantile economy.[1] In the late fifth century, the Chinese had discovered how to cast iron, and with their strong iron tools were able to clear an immense amount of forest land. By the end of the fourth century, the Wei Valley, the Chengdu basin, and the central plain were under continuous cultivation. Farmers learned to use manure, to distinguish different kinds of soil, and the best times to plow, sow, or drain the land. Harvests improved, and despite the destructive warfare, there was a rapid growth in population. A new class of merchants arose, who worked closely with the princes, building foundries and developing mines. The most enterprising merchants established large trading empires and took their goods north to Korea, the steppes, and even as far as India, trading in textiles, cereals, salt, metals, hides, and leather, and employing an ever-growing number of artisans, agents, and fleets of carts and boats.

The cities were no longer simply political and religious capitals, but had become centers of trade and industry, accommodating thousands of citizens. In the feudal period, the walls of the little palace towns had measured a mere five hundred yards; now some city walls were over two miles long. In the fourth century, Linzi, the capital of Qi, was the largest city in China, with three

hundred thousand inhabitants. An urban class of craftsmen and tradesmen, no longer tied to the royal palace, had emerged there, and the wealthy enjoyed the new luxuries and the thriving entertainment industry. The princes of Qi became patrons of the leading scholars of China, and in 357 founded the Jixia Academy beside the western gate of Linzi, where *shi* literati lived in well-appointed apartments on generous stipends.[8]

Many enjoyed these changes, but others were becoming uneasily aware that their lives were very different from the ritualized existence of their forefathers. The princes of the big, successful states were no longer hedged around with ceremonial restrictions. Instead of "doing nothing," as the royal *li* required, the rulers enthusiastically pursued their own ambitious policies and were intent on monopolizing power. In the early fourth century, the king of Wei replaced the hereditary barons and ministers with a civil service of salaried officials. The old administrative offices had been tied to the great families, but now the king could choose his own functionaries, and if they were disobedient, he could simply get rid of them. Unsatisfactory politicians were summarily exiled or executed. As other states followed the example of Wei, politics became an extremely dangerous game. The princes occasionally consulted the *shi* moralists, but paid far more attention to the merchants. Increasingly their policies reflected the shrewd pragmatism and calculation of the new commercial ethos.

The economic boom accentuated inequalities and caused massive social disruption. Peasants were regularly drafted into the army and torn away from their homes and fields; some became successful farmers, but others fell into debt and were turned off their land. The rulers purloined many of the marshes and forests where peasants had fished, hunted game, or gathered wood. Village communities were fatally damaged, and many peasants were forced to become laborers in the factories and foundries. Some aristocratic families were ruined, and the small, old-fashioned principalities were in constant danger of annihilation. A great void had opened in the lives of many people. "What is lawful, what is unlawful?" asked Ku Yuan, prince and poet of Chu. "This country is a slough of despond! Nothing is pure any longer! Informers are

exalted! And wise men of gentle birth are without renown!"[3] He had begged his prince to consult a holy man and return to the Way, but was dismissed, banished, and in 209 committed suicide.

Others wanted nothing whatever to do with this brave new world and retired to the forests. Hermits had been opting out of city life for some time; Confucius had met some of these anchorites, who had ridiculed his attempts to reform society.[4] These solitaries were nothing like the renouncers of India. They simply wanted a quiet life. Some took the high moral ground, however, speaking in a "critical and disparaging" way about the current state of affairs.[5] Their hero was Shen Nong, the legendary sage king who had invented agriculture.[6] Unlike the ambitious rulers of their own day, Shen Nong had not tried to centralize his empire but had allowed each fiefdom to remain autonomous; he had not terrorized his ministers and, apart from a regular inspection of the crops, had ruled by "doing nothing" (*wu wei*). Other hermits were content simply to live an idyllic life, hunting and fishing in the forests and marshlands,[7] but by the middle of the fourth century, they too had developed a philosophy, which they attributed to one Master Yang.[8]

Yangzi left no book, but his ideas were preserved in other texts. He issued a direct and disturbing challenge to the Confucians and Mohists. The family *li* had insisted that a person's life was not his own. Heaven had allotted humans a fixed life span, so if you put your life in danger, you violated Heaven's will. Now that life at court had become so dangerous, it was clearly wrong to seek political office.[9] Yangists, therefore, made a principled retreat from public life. They argued that Yao and Shun had not retired from government out of humility, as the Confucians believed, but because they refused to put their own or other people's lives at risk. Yangists liked to quote the example of Tan Fu, an ancestor of the Zhou kings, who had renounced the throne rather than fight an invading army: "To send to their deaths the sons and younger brothers of those with whom I dwell is more than I could bear," he explained in his abdication speech.[10]

Yangists had no time for either *ren* or "concern for everybody." Their philosophy was "Every man for himself."[11] This seemed

monstrously selfish to the Confucians, who complained that if Yangzi "could benefit the empire by pulling out one hair, he would not do so."[13] But Yangists insisted that it was irresponsible to get involved with other people or institutions; your prime duty was to preserve your own life and do only what came naturally. Yangists must not meddle with their human nature, but should follow the Way that had been established by Heaven. It was wrong to refuse pleasure or submit to the artificial rituals of court life, which distorted human relationships. You could not make real contact with people if you followed the *li* instead of your feelings. Life should be spontaneous and sincere.

Many people in China were attracted by the Yangist ideal, but others found it disturbing.[14] They had always believed that the rituals established the Way of Heaven on earth. Were these *li* really damaging? If Yangzi was right, virtuous kings who had denied themselves pleasure for the sake of their subjects had been foolish and wrongheaded, while immoral tyrants who simply enjoyed themselves were far closer to Heaven. Were human beings basically selfish? If so, what could be done to make the world a better place? What was the basis for morality? Was the Confucian ideal of self-cultivation perverse? And what exactly was the "human nature" that the Yangists prized so highly? These questions were discussed by the scholars of the Jixia Academy, one of whom wrote a Confucian riposte to Yangism in a mystical essay called *Inward Training* (*Xinshu Shang*) for the guidance of a ruler.

The author argued that *ren* was not a distortion of human nature but its fulfillment; indeed, the very word *ren* was synonymous with humanity. If a prince wanted to become truly "human hearted," he must discover the core of his own being. Instead of fleeing to the forest to find peace and security, he must cultivate an interior quiet by means of meditation. By learning to check his passions, still his desires, and empty his mind of distracting thoughts, the enlightened prince would find his true and authentic self. He would clarify his mental powers, his physical health would improve, and he would discover that without making any further effort, he had "naturally" become a man of *ren*. The Chinese had discovered introspection and by the fourth century had

developed their own version of yoga. We know very little about these early forms of meditation, but they seem to have involved exercises of concentration and controlled breathing. In the old days, the kings had established the Way by adopting the correct physical orientation. Now, according to *Inward Training*, a prince could put the world to rights by finding his true center within.

Chinese meditation was based on the management of *qi*, a word that is difficult to translate. *Qi* was the raw material of life, its basic energy, and its primal spirit. It animated all beings and gave everything its distinctive shape and form. The dynamic, ceaselessly active substructure of reality, *qi* was not unlike the atoms of Democritus, except that it was more mystical. Under the guidance of the Way, the ultimate controlling force, it periodically accumulated in various combinations to form a rock, a plant, or a human being. But none of these creations was permanent. Eventually the *qi* would disperse: the person or plant would die, and the rock would disintegrate. But the *qi* was still alive; it would continue to roil in the cauldron of ceaseless change, and would eventually regroup and take on a different shape. Everything in the universe, therefore, shared the same life, albeit in different degrees of intensity.

The purest and most concentrated form of *qi* was being itself, the "quintessence" (*jing*) of reality. In meditation, the contemplative learned to liberate his *qi*. By systematically removing all the desire, hatred, and restless mental activity that blocked its natural course, the contemplative enabled his *qi* to flow unimpeded through his heart, mind, and body in the way Heaven intended. When he achieved this total alignment with the Way, he fell into a trance, and a sacred peace rose up from within; this was the *shen*, his deepest and most divine self, which was one with the quintessence (*jing*) of existence. In meditation, therefore, the enlightened prince discovered his true nature. Not only was his "heart" (*xin*), the organ of thought, perfected, but his hearing, sight, and limbs were healthier too.[15] He would thus be able to fulfill his allotted span of life. Because he was one with the *jing*, the "quintessence" of everything that existed, he experienced a sense of union with the whole of reality, and could exclaim: "All things are at my disposal, within myself."[16]

At a time when China was torn apart by terrifying wars, Chi... nese mystics were discovering a tranquillity within themselves that drew everything together. This desire for unification also in... formed the new vogue for dialectic and debate. The intense dis... cussions between Mohists, Confucians, and Yangists had led to a fascination with the mechanics of argument. Like the Greek Sophists, the *bianzhe* ("debaters") delighted in their ability to prove both sides of an argument and undermine received ideas. Many people found them trivial and irresponsible, but the de... baters saw their work as a cohesive force, which brought appar... ently disparate objects together and revealed an underlying unity. One of them exclaimed: "I brought together similarity and dif... ference, discerned hardness and whiteness; what was certain and what was not, what was possible and what was not."[17]

The most famous of these early dialecticians was a remarkable man: Huizi (370–319) was prime minister of Wei, one of the most advanced of the warring states.[18] Very little of his writing has sur... vived, but he seems to have felt a strong affinity with Mohism. The only work that has come down to us is a set of ten paradoxes that revealed the instability that he discerned at the heart of exis... tence.[19] Huizi wanted to demonstrate that words were misleading because they gave things an illusory permanence and solidity. "*Today I left for Yueh,*" he said, "*and arrived yesterday.*" Time was en... tirely relative: the "yesterday" of today was the "today" of yester... day, and today's "today" would be tomorrow's "yesterday." In another paradox, he demonstrated the relativity of our spatial concepts: "*I know where the center is of the whole world: north of Yen and south of Yueh.*" Because Yan was in the north of China, and Yue was in the south, the "center" should logically lie between these two extremes. But when you stepped outside a strictly Chinese perspective, it was clear that any spot could become the center of the world, just as any point on a line could be the starting point of a circle.

The theses were really points for contemplation, designed to show that the distinctions we imagine we see were delusions. Even life and death were aspects of each other: "*When the sun is in the centre, it is in the decline,*" said Huizi. "*That which is born is dying.*"

Everything was in flux, so from the very first moment of its existence, the life of any creature had already started to decay. People used words such as "high" and "low" in an absolute sense, without realizing that an object is only "high" in comparison with something else, so "*Heaven is on the same level as Earth and the mountains are equal with the marshes.*" It was a mistake to put things into hard-and-fast categories, because everything was unique, even objects that were superficially similar: "*That which is joined is separate.*" All things were, therefore, one: Heaven and earth, life and death, superior and lowly. A politician, an activist, and a Mohist, Huizi may have wanted to suggest that all human beings had equal value, and that social fortune was also mutable.[20]

In the first of his theses, Huizi pointed to a reality that lay beyond anything we experienced in ordinary life. "*The greatest thing has nothing outside it and we call this the great One; the smallest thing has nothing inside it, and we call this the smallest One.*" We called an object "big" only because it was larger than something else; but actually everything was "great" because there was nothing in our world that was not bigger than something else. Yet the categories "greatest" and "smallest" existed in our minds, which showed that we had the power to imagine the absolute. Language laid bare a transcendence that was built into the structure of our thought. Huizi's paradoxes had a spiritual and social resonance that Zeno's did not, and his ten propositions were framed by the notions of transcendence and compassion. In the first thesis, Huizi directed our attention to the great One that had nothing beyond itself. The tenth and last thesis was Mohist: "*Love embraces all forms of life and Heaven and Earth are of One.*" Because the distinctions on which we based our likes and dislikes were delusions, we should feel equal concern for all beings. The last thesis looked back to the first, because the "great One" comprised the whole of reality: Heaven and Earth were not distinct and antithetical but one.[21] Everything, therefore, deserved our love and ultimate concern.

This spiritual vision helps to explain Huizi's unlikely friendship with Zhuangzi (c. 370–311), one of the most important figures of the Chinese Axial Age.[22] A Yangist and a hermit, Zhuangzi seems at first sight to have little in common with the dignified prime

minister of Wei. He remained an outsider all his life. He once visited the king of Wei dressed in a worn, patched gown, his shoes tied together with string, and for some years he lived in a slum, earning his living by weaving sandals. But Zhuangzi had an ebullient, original, and brilliant mind, and never felt at a loss before the rich and powerful. He loved sparring with Huizi, and after his death complained that he no longer had anybody to talk to, but ultimately Zhuangzi felt that dialectic was too narrow. Huizi, for example, was a Mohist, but could not the Confucians also be right? If everything was relative, as Huizi suggested, why should only one philosophy be correct? In his view, the bickering and point scoring of the philosophers were pure egotism: the Way was beyond limited human notions of right and wrong, truth and falsehood.

The book attributed to Zhuangzi is actually an anthology of texts that date from the fourth to the end of the third century. Traditionally, only the first seven chapters are thought to contain Zhuangzi's own teachings, but modern analysis has revealed that these "Inner Chapters" include later material, and that some of the other sections are closer in style to the historical Zhuangzi. The book began as a defense of private life. Zhuangzi was irritated by the Mohists and Confucians, who, he thought, were positively bursting with self-importance, pompously convinced that they had a mission to save the world. Politics could not change human nature: when kings and politicians interfered with the lives of their subjects, they invariably made matters worse. Zhuangzi believed in nongovernment. It was unnatural and perverse to force people to obey man-made laws; it was like shortening the legs of a crane, putting a halter around a horse's neck or a string through an ox's nose.[23]

When Zhuangzi first retired from public life in search of peace and security, he had been a Yangist. But one day, he realized that it was impossible for any creature to live a wholly safe and protected life.[24] He had trespassed into a game reserve to poach some fowl, had spotted a large magpie, and taken careful aim, fully expecting the bird to fly off in alarm. But the magpie did not even notice Zhuangzi, because it had its eye on a delicious cicada that was basking in a lovely shady spot, heedless of its personal safety. A

preying mantis was flexed ready to spring on the cicada, so intent upon the chase that it too ignored the magpie, which swept down on its prey in high excitement and gobbled them both up—still oblivious of Zhuangzi and his crossbow. Zhuangzi sighed with compassion. "Ah, so it is that one thing brings disaster upon another, and then upon itself." None of these creatures was aware of impending danger, because they were all programmed to hunt one another. Whether they willed it or not, they were involved in a chain of mutual destruction. No one could live a wholly isolated life—not even a hermit: Zhuangzi himself had been so busy taking aim at the magpie that he had not noticed the appearance on the scene of a gamekeeper, who angrily chased him out of the park. The incident made a great impression on Zhuangzi, and for three months he was depressed. He could now see that the Yangist creed was based on an illusion: it was impossible to protect yourself in the way Yangzi taught. We were conditioned to destroy and be destroyed, to eat and be eaten. We could not escape our destiny. Until we became reconciled to the endless process of destruction and dissolution, we would have no peace.

After the incident in the park, Zhuangzi found that he looked at the world quite differently. He began to realize that everything was in flux and constantly in the process of becoming something else—yet we were always trying to freeze our thoughts and experiences and make them absolute. This was not how the Way of Heaven operated. Anything that tried to close itself off from the endless transformation of life in an attempt to become autonomous and self-contained was going against the natural rhythm of the cosmos. Once he had fully appreciated this, Zhuangzi felt an exhilarating freedom. He found that he was no longer afraid of death, because it was futile to try to preserve your life indefinitely. Death and life, joy and sorrow succeeded each other, like day and night. When he died and ceased to be "Zhuangzi," nothing would change. He would remain what essentially he had always been: a tiny part of the endlessly mutating pageant of the universe.

Zhuangzi sometimes used shock tactics to bring this truth home to friends and disciples. When Zhuangzi's wife died, Huizi came to pay a condolence call, and was horrified to find him sit-

ting cross-legged, singing rowdily, and bashing a battered old tub—flagrantly violating the dignified ceremonies of the mourning period. "She was your wife! She bore your children!" protested Huizi. "The least you can do is shed a tear for her!" Zhuangzi smiled. When she first died, he had mourned his wife like everybody else. But then he cast his mind back to the time before she was born, when she had simply been part of the endlessly churning *qi*, the raw material of the universe. One day there had been a wonderful change: the *qi* had mingled together in a new way, and suddenly there was his dear wife! Now she was dead and had simply gone through another alteration. "She is like the four seasons in the way that spring, summer, autumn and winter follow each other," Zhuangzi reflected. She was now at peace, lying in the bosom of the *dao*, the greatest of mansions. If he wept and complained, he would be completely at odds with the Way things really were.[25]

Zhuangzi and his friends showed a bemused, detached delight in the change, death, and dissolution that filled so many of the other sages of the Axial Age with dismay. One day, Master Li, one of Zhuangzi's disciples, had visited a dying friend, and to his disgust found his wife and children sobbing at the bedside. "Out of the way! Shoo!" he cried. "Don't pester change in the making!" Then, leaning against the door of his sick friend's bedroom, he remarked whimsically: "It's amazing—that Maker-of-Things! What will it make of you next? Where will it send you? Will it make you into a rat's liver? Will it make you into a bug's arm?" "Our parents are part of us," the dying man replied.

> East and west, north and south—wherever we go, we follow their wishes. And we obey *yin* and *yang* even more completely. They've brought me here to the brink of death and to resist their wishes would be such insolence.
>
> We call our life a blessing, so our death must be a blessing too. Suppose a mighty metal-smith cast a piece of metal, which jumped up and said, "*No, no—I must be*

one of those legendary Moyeh swords!" Wouldn't the metal-smith consider it ominous metal? And suppose, having chanced upon human form, I insist, "*Human, human, and nothing but human!*" Wouldn't the Maker-of-Change consider me an ominous person? I see Heaven and Earth as a mighty foundry and the Maker-of-Change as a mighty metal-smith—so wherever they send me, how could I ever complain? I'll sleep soundly—and then, suddenly, I'll wake.[26]

Once they had given up thinking of themselves as unique and precious individuals whose lives must be preserved at all costs, Zhuangzi and his friends found that they could observe their predicament with cheerful interest and detachment, and remain calm and content.[27] Once you were entirely reconciled with the Way of Heaven, you were at peace because you were attuned to reality.

What exactly was the Way? Time and again, Zhuangzi insisted that the Way was unthinkable, inexpressible, and impossible to define. It had no qualities, no form; it could be experienced but never seen. It was not a god; it had existed before Heaven and Earth, and was beyond divinity; it was more ancient than antiquity—yet it was not old. It was both being and nonbeing.[28] It represented all the myriad patterns, forms, and potential that made nature the way it was.[29] The Way mysteriously ordered the shifting transformations of the *qi*, but it existed at a point where all the distinctions that characterize our normal modes of thought cease. Any attempt to pontificate about these ineffable matters simply led to unseemly, egotistic squabbling. We had to realize that we knew nothing. If we selected one theory and rejected another, we were distorting reality, trying to force the creative flow of life into a channel of our own making. The only valid assertion was a question that plunged us into doubt and a luminous sense of unknowing. We should not be dismayed to find that there was no such thing as certainty, because this confusion could lead us to the Way.

Egotism was the greatest obstacle to enlightenment. It was an inflated sense of self that made us identify with one opinion rather than another; ego made us quarrelsome and officious, because we wanted to change other people to suit ourselves. Zhuangzi often mischievously used the figure of Confucius to express some of his own ideas. One day, he said, Yan Hui told Confucius that he was off to reform the king of Wei, a violent, reckless, and irresponsible young man. Marvelous, Confucius remarked wryly, but Yan Hui did not fully understand himself. How could he possibly change anybody else? All he could do was lay down the law and explain a few Confucian principles. How would these external directives affect the obscure subconscious impulses that were the source of the king's cruelty? There was only one thing that Yan Hui could do. He must empty his mind, get rid of all this bustling self-importance, and find his inner core.

> "Centre your attention," Confucius began. "Stop listening with your ears and listen with your mind. Then stop listening with your mind and listen with your primal spirit [*qi*]. Hearing is limited to the ear. Mind is limited to tallying things up. But the primal spirit's empty: it's simply that which awaits things. Tao is emptiness merged and emptiness is the mind's fast."[30]

Instead of using every opportunity to feed the ego, we had to starve it. Even our best intentions could be grist to the mill of our selfishness. But *qi* had no agenda; it simply allowed itself to be shaped and transformed by the Way, and so everything turned out well. If Yan Hui stopped blocking the *qi*, deflecting it from its natural course, the Way could act through him. Only then could he become a force for good in the world. By the end of the conversation, however, Yan Hui seemed to have lost all interest in the project.

Once people stopped arguing about doctrines and theories, they could acquire what Zhuangzi called the Great Knowledge. Instead of claiming that *this* could not mean *that*, they began to see that all apparent contradictions formed a mysterious, numi-

nous unity. This *coincidentia oppositorum* brought them to the hub of the wheel, the axis of the Way, "the pivot at the centre of the circle, for it can react equally to that which is and to that which is not."[31] The unenlightened state was like the vision of a frog who lived in a well and could see only a little patch of sky that he mistook for the whole. After he had seen the entire reality, his perspective was changed forever.[32] The Great Knowledge could never be defined; Zhuangzi would describe only its effects. It gave the sage a sensitive and intelligent responsiveness to each circumstance as it arose. He did not plan how he would act ahead of time; he did not agonize over alternative courses of action or stick to a rigid set of rules. Once he had ceased to obstruct the Way, he would acquire a spontaneity that resembled the knack of a talented craftsman.

Zhuangzi told another story about Confucius, who was traveling with his disciples through a forest and met a hunchback who was trapping cicadas with a sticky pole. To Confucius's astonishment, the hunchback never missed a single one. How did he manage it? He had clearly so perfected his powers of concentration that he had lost himself in his task, and achieved an *ekstasis*, a self-forgetfulness that brought him into perfect harmony with the Way. "Do you have the Way?" Confucius asked. "Indeed I have!" replied the hunchback. He had no idea how he did it! But he had practiced for months and could now bring himself into a state in which he was wholly focused on catching cicadas: "never tiring, never leaning, never being aware of any of the vast number of living beings, except cicadas. Following this method, how could I fail?" He had left his conscious self behind and let the *qi* take over, Confucius explained to his disciples: "He keeps his will undivided and his spirit energized," so that his hands seemed to move by themselves. Conscious deliberate planning would be distracting and counterproductive. The hunchback reminded Zhuangzi of the carpenter Bian, who explained: "When I work on a wheel, if I hit it too softly, pleasant as this is, it doesn't make for a good wheel. If I hit furiously, I get tired, and the thing doesn't work! So, not too soft, not too vigorous. I grasp it in my hand and hold it in my heart. I cannot express this by word of mouth, I just know it.

I cannot teach this to my son, nor can my son learn it from me."[33] In the same way, a sage who had learned not to analyze, make distinctions, and weigh alternatives had left the "ego principle" behind, did what came naturally, and became one with the deeper and most divine rhythm of the universe.

What did this feel like? Zhuangzi told his disciples about Ziqi, the contemplative, whose friends had come upon him one day "gazing into the sky, breath shallow and face blank, as if he were lost to himself." This had never happened before. Ziqi looked like an entirely different person. What had happened? "Do you understand such things?" asked Ziqi. "Just then I'd lost myself completely." He had "gone" in the same way as a craftsman disappeared into his work. When we tried to hold on to ourselves, we were alienated from the "great transformation" of the Way. Because he had lost himself, Ziqi was liberated from the constraints of selfishness. He could now see more clearly than ever before. "Perhaps you've heard the music of humans," he told his friends, "but you haven't heard the music of earth. Or if you've heard the music of earth, you haven't heard the music of Heaven." When you achieved this larger vision, you heard everything singing together, and yet you could distinguish each thing separately. This was the Great Knowledge; it was "broad and unhurried," while "small understanding is cramped and busy."[34]

You could not achieve this illumination unless you abandoned all previous habits of thought. The true sage did not amass knowledge, but learned to forget one thing after another, until finally he forgot about himself and could merge joyously into the Way. Zhuangzi told yet another story about Confucius and Yan Hui.

"I'm gaining ground!" Yan Hui had announced one day.

"What do you mean?" asked Confucius.

"I've forgotten Humanity [*ren*] and Duty [*yi*] completely," Yan Hui replied.

"Not bad!" admitted Confucius. "But that's still not it."

A few days later, Yan Hui exclaimed: "I've forgotten ritual and music completely."

"That's still not it," said Confucius.

But finally Yan Hui surprised his master. "I'm gaining ground!" he beamed. "I sit quietly and forget."

Confucius shifted uneasily. "What do you mean?" he asked.

"I let the body fall away and the intellect fade," said Yan Hui. "I throw out form, abandon understanding—and then move freely, blending away into the great transformation. That's what I mean by *sit quietly and forget.*"

Confucius went pale; his disciple had surpassed him.

> "If you blend away like that, you're free of likes and dislikes," he said. "If you're all transformation, you're free of permanence. So in the end, the true sage here is you! So you won't mind if I follow you from now on, will you?"[35]

To "know" a thing is to distinguish it from everything else. To forget these distinctions is to become aware of undifferentiated unity, and to lose all sense of being a separate individual.

Zhuangzi's enlightenment was different from the Buddha's; it did not seem to have happened once and for all time. He could not walk around in a perpetual trance; there were times when he had to analyze things and make distinctions in order to function in normal life.[36] Sometimes he was "with Heaven," and at other times he was "one with humanity."[37] But at the heart of his life, he felt at peace with the Way, the "root" or "seed" from which all things grow and the axis around which they revolved.

Zhuangzi was not entirely happy about the Mohist ideal of "love" or "concern," because it required people to fix their attention on individual beings that were too ephemeral for this degree of attention. But he did preach a spirituality of empathy. The sage, he believed, was essentially unselfish. "The perfect man has no self," he explained.[38] He regards other people as "I." "People cry, so he cries—he considers everything as his own being," because he had lost all sense of himself as separate and particular.[39] His heart had become "empty" and simply reflected other beings in their integrity, like a mirror, without the distorting lens of ego.[40] A true sage did not need rules about *ren*. He spontaneously

sought the good of others, without ponderously thinking of himself as concerned for other people.[41] Once he had the Great Knowledge, he had acquired the knack of unselfconscious benevolence.

Zhuangzi probably considered his contemporary Meng Ke (371–288), who is known in the West as Mencius, an egotistic busybody, because he was so desperately eager to take an active role in public life.[42] A devout Confucian, Mencius became a scholar at the Jixia Academy, but his real ambition was to serve in the government. Like Confucius, however, he had no success. He failed to win the confidence of either King Xuan of Qi or King Hui of Liang, both of whom found his ideas ludicrously impractical. But Mencius did not give up easily, and for years traveled from one state to another, trying to persuade the princes to return to the Way. He could not turn his back on the world, like Zhuangzi, but believed that he had been appointed by Heaven to save it.

Mencius saw a pattern in history. A sage king appeared every five hundred years or so, and in the intervening period people were governed by ordinary "men of renown." Since it was over seven hundred years since the rule of the early Zhou kings, the new sage ruler was sadly overdue. Mencius was acutely aware that China had changed—in his view, for the worse. "The people have never suffered more under tyrannical government than today," he lamented. "It must be that Heaven does not desire to bring peace to the world." But if Heaven *did* want to save the world, who else but he could do it?[43] As a mere commoner, he could not be a sage king, but he did believe that he been appointed Heaven's messenger to the princes. The people were crying out for good leadership. They would flock to any ruler who treated them kindly, with benevolence and justice.

When it was clear that the princes would never take him seriously, Mencius retired and wrote a book that recorded his discussions with the rulers he had tried to serve. He believed that it was impossible to govern by force. The people submitted to coercive rule because they had no choice, but if a peace-loving king came to power, they would flock to him "with admiration in their

hearts" because goodness had a "transformative power."[44] Instead of relying on military might, he told King Hui, he should "reduce punishment and taxation, and get the people to plough deeply and weed promptly." In their spare time, able-bodied young men must learn to live by the family *li*, and become good brothers and sons. Once they had received this moral grounding, they would, as a matter of course, be loyal subjects and a source of great strength. They would "inflict defeat on the strong armour and sharp weapons" of the larger states, even if they were "armed with nothing but staves."[45] Why? Because all the best ministers would want to serve in the administration of a just and compassionate king; farmers would want to cultivate his lands; merchants to trade in his cities. "Anyone with a grievance against their own rulers would come and complain to your Majesty," Mencius told King Hui. "If that happens, who could stop it?"[46]

Confucius had believed that ritual alone could transform society, but Mencius had witnessed the economic and agricultural revolutions of the Warring States period. Instead of admiring their ritual proficiency, Mencius revered Yao and Shun as engineers, practical men of action. At the time of Yao, China had been overwhelmed by a terrible flood, and Yao—alone of all the people—"was filled with anxiety."[47] He cut channels for the water, so that it could flow into the sea, and the people were able to level the ground and make it habitable. Shun appointed Yu his minister of works, and for eight long years Yu had dredged the rivers, deepened their beds, and built new dikes. In all that time, he never slept a single night in his own house. He had no time to spare for agriculture, so Shun appointed Hou Chi to show the people how to cultivate grain. But once the people had full bellies, moral standards declined, and this gave Shun much disquiet. He therefore appointed Fang Xun as his education minister, to instruct the people in the *li* of human relationships.[48]

Mencius stressed the loving concern that the sage kings had felt for the people. In his account, the first sign of emergent sagehood in both Yao and Shun was that they worried about their people, were made anxious by their plight, and filled with concern and distress. A sage could not bear to see other people suffering. Each had

"a heart sensitive to the pain of others . . . and this manifested itself in compassionate government," Mencius argued. The sage kings were not content simply to feel sorry for their subjects; they energetically and creatively translated their concern into effective action. Their good, practical government sprang from compassion (*ren*), the ability to look beyond self-interest, "the extension of one's scope of activity to include others."[49]

The princes of the Warring States period might not have Yao and Shun's exceptional talents, but they could and must imitate their altruism. Confucius had refused to define *ren*; Mencius gave it a clear, narrow meaning: "benevolence," the essential virtue that made it impossible for him to turn his back upon the world. He distrusted Mozi's "concern for everybody," fearing that this generalized goodwill would undermine the family bonds that were essential to society,[50] even though he agreed that concern could not stop at the family. He told King Xuan to begin by treating the elderly members of his own family reverently. Once he had mastered this habit of respect, he would naturally extend it to old people in other families. Finally, he would be able to treat all his subjects with benevolence, and they would then submit gladly to his rule.[51]

Mencius did not agree that the rules of *ren* were artificial but believed that it was natural for people to respond compassionately to suffering. He reminded King Xuan that he had recently spared the life of an ox that was being led to sacrifice. When he had seen the poor beast crossing his hall and heard its pitiful cry, he had called out to the attendant: "Spare it! I cannot bear to see it shrinking in fear, like an innocent man going to the place of execution."[52] That had been a good impulse, but it was only the beginning. Next the king should apply this instinctive sympathy to his subjects and treat them more kindly, and finally he should extend his concern to other states. Mencius believed that human nature was basically good—that it inclined to *ren* spontaneously. Mohists believed that people could be moved only by self-interest and that goodness had to be drilled into them from outside, but Mencius argued that it was as natural for us to behave morally as

it was for our bodies to develop into a mature human form. We could stunt both our physical and moral growth by bad habits, but the instinctive tendency toward goodness remained.

Every single person had four fundamental "impulses" (*tuan*) that, if properly cultivated, would grow into the four cardinal virtues: benevolence, justice, courtesy, and the wisdom to distinguish right from wrong. They were like the first shoots that would one day grow into a plant.[53] These "shoots" were as natural to us as our arms and legs. Nobody was wholly without sympathy for others. If a man saw a child teetering on the brink of a well, about to fall in, he would immediately lunge forward to save it—not in order to ingratiate himself with the parents, win the admiration of his friends, or because he was irritated by the child's cries. He would be moved by an instinctive impulse of compassion. There would be something fundamentally wrong with a person who could watch the child fall to its death without a flicker of disquiet. In the same way, somebody who had absolutely no sense of shame or who lacked any rudimentary sense of right or wrong would be a defective human being. You could stamp on these "shoots"—just as you could cripple or deform yourself—but if they were cultivated properly, they acquired a vibrant, dynamic power of their own. Once they were active, they would transform not only the person who practiced them but everyone with whom he came in contact—like the potency of the king. Somebody who had successfully cultivated all four "shoots" could save the world.[54]

Mencius was living in the troubled period of the Warring States. He knew that the embryonic seeds of goodness were easily destroyed. Everywhere he looked, he could see examples of greed and selfishness, which, he believed, obstructed the flow of *qi* and perverted the natural tendency to goodness. The "shoots" resided naturally in the "heart," the thinking, affective organ, but many people simply threw their hearts away. The common people had been corrupted by cruelty, hunger, and exploitation. The upper classes were so avid for luxury, pleasure, power, and fame that they had neglected the "shoots" and allowed them to shrivel and die.

Only the *junzi*, the mature person, had kept his heart alive.[55] Most people's hearts resembled Ox Mountain, which had once been covered in luxuriant, leafy groves, but had been stripped bare by reckless, brutal deforestation. It was hard to believe that there had ever been any trees on Ox Mountain, just as it was difficult to imagine that a bestial, selfish person had ever had any good qualities. But the potential had been there. "Given the right nourishment, there is nothing that will not grow, and deprived of it, there is nothing that will not wither away."[56]

Mencius was an optimist. Even if you had lost your heart, it was always possible to find it again. *Wu wei* ("doing nothing") was not the answer; the world needed *yu wei* ("self-effort"), which brought human beings into harmony with Heaven. The purpose of the Confucian education was to search for the compassionate heart that had gone astray. How strange it was that people were unconcerned about this diminution of their humanity! They spent a great deal of time and energy looking for missing chickens or dogs, but did nothing to recover their own hearts.[57] Everybody—without exception—had the capacity to cultivate the four essential virtues and become a sage like Yao or Shun. As soon as it was found and repaired, the sympathetic heart was so constructed that it would blaze forth like a forest fire or burst into the air like a spring that had forced its way up from the depths of the earth. A sage was simply a person who had fully realized his humanity and become one with Heaven.[58] Most of us found compassion difficult at first; we had to nourish our innate virtue by constantly repeated acts of benevolence, reverence, justice, and equity. Each time we acted well, we strengthened the "shoots," until the cardinal virtues became habitual. A vigorous campaign of *yu wei* would result in the creation of the "unmoved" or "steadfast" heart, which could keep unruly passions in check.

The person who persevered in this struggle for goodness would arrive at what Mencius called "floodlike *qi*" (*hao jan chi qi*)—a phrase that he coined himself and found difficult to explain. It was a special sort of *qi*, which lifted human beings to the divine:

> This is a *ch'i** which is, in the highest degree, vast and unyielding (*hao jan*). Nourish it with integrity and place no obstacle in its path and it will fill the space between Heaven and Earth. It is a *ch'i* which unites rightness and the Way. Deprive it of these and it will collapse. It is born of accumulated rightness, and cannot be appropriated by anybody through a sporadic show of rightness.[59]

The practice of *ren* would bring ordinary, frail human beings into harmony with the Way. Zhuangzi had experienced something similar, but had claimed that self-consciousness could only impede the flow of the *qi*. Not so, Mencius replied; unity with the Way could be attained by disciplined, sustained moral effort.

The Golden Rule was crucial. This was the virtue that made the *junzi* truly humane, and brought the individual into a mystical relationship with the entire universe. "All the ten thousand things are there in me," Mencius said in one of his most important instructions. "There is no greater joy for me than to find, on self-examination, that I am true to myself. Try your best to treat others as you would wish to be treated yourself, and you will find that this is the shortest way to benevolence [*ren*]."[60] By behaving as though other people were as important as yourself, you could experience an ecstatic unity with all things. A *junzi* no longer felt that there was any distinction between him and other creatures. Such a person became a divine force for good in a troubled world.

When he looked back to the feudal period, a time when the king's egotism had been constrained by the *li*, Mencius believed that his subjects had been content. Those distant days seemed like a golden age compared with the violence and terror of the Warring States period. The king had radiated the potency of the Way and had exerted a profound moral influence on his people, who had been "happy," "expansive and content." They had "moved daily to-

*In his text, Lau uses the old Wade-Giles system of transliteration of Chinese characters rather than the Pinyin system used in this book. Hence *qi* is rendered *ch'i*.

ward goodness without realizing who brought this about." There were no kings of that caliber today, but anybody could become a *junzi*, a fully mature person, and have the same effect on his environment. "A *junzi* transforms where he passes, and works wonders where he abides. He is in the same stream as Heaven above and Earth below. Can he be said to bring but small benefit?"[6]

In China, the Axial Age had started late but was now in full flower. In the other regions, it was either running down or in the process of becoming something different. We see this clearly in the *Mahabharata*, the great epic of India.[6a] The story is set in the Kuru-Panchala region during the period of the *Brahmanas*, before the rise of the state systems, but the oral transmission of the epic started in about 500; it was not committed to writing until the first centuries of the common era, when it achieved its final form. The *Mahabharata* is, therefore, a complex, multilayered text, an anthology of many strands of tradition. The general outline of the story, however, had probably been established by the end of the fourth century. Unlike the defining texts of the Axial Age, which were composed in priestly and renouncer circles, the epic reflects the ethos of the *kshatriya* warrior class. The religious revolution of the Axial Age left them with a perplexing dilemma. How could a king or warrior who admired the ideal of *ahimsa* become reconciled with his vocation, which demanded that he fight and kill in order to defend his community?

The duties of each class were sacred. Each had its own inviolable dharma, a divinely ordained way of life. A Brahmin's duty was to become expert in Vedic lore; the *kshatriya* was responsible for law, order, and defense; and the *vaishya* had to devote his energies to the production of wealth. The renouncers depended on the support of the warriors and merchants, who gave them the alms, food, and security that enabled them to dedicate themselves full-time to the religious quest. Yet in order to carry out their duties successfully, kings, warriors, and merchants were compelled to behave in ways that were—in Buddhist parlance—"unskillful" or even

downright sinful. To perform successfully in the marketplace, *vaishyas* had to be ambitious, to want worldly goods, and to compete aggressively with their rivals, and this "desire" bound them inexorably to the cycle of death and rebirth. But the *kshatriya*'s vocation was especially problematic. During a military campaign, he was sometimes forced to be economical with the truth or even to tell lies. He might have to betray former friends and allies, and to kill innocent people. None of these activities was compatible with the yogic ethos, which demanded nonviolence and a strict adherence to truth at all times. The *kshatriya* could only hope to become a monk in his next life, but given the nature of his daily karma, it seemed unlikely that he could achieve even this limited goal. Was there no hope? The *Mahabharata* agonized over these questions, but could find no satisfactory solution.

It is very difficult to date any single passage of the *Mahabharata* accurately or even to isolate the original story. In the long process of transmission, old and new material became inextricably combined, and in the first centuries of the common era, the epic was reinterpreted by priestly scholars. Yet the general movement of the narrative does yield some insight into the preoccupations of the *kshatriyas* as the Axial Age drew to a close. The *Mahabharata* tells the story of a catastrophic war between two sets of cousins, the Kauravas and the Pandavas, who were competing for control of the Kuru-Panchala region. Not only was the family torn apart; the war almost resulted in the annihilation of the entire human race. It brought the heroic age to an end, and ushered in the Kali Yuga, our own deeply flawed era.

This was an apocalyptic war, and yet it is not presented in the *Mahabharata* as a struggle between good and evil. The Pandavas were destined to win, but they managed to defeat the Kauravas only by resorting to some highly dubious maneuvers that were suggested by their friend and ally Krishna, the chieftain of the Yadava clan. Even though they had no choice but to act as they did, the Pandavas felt deeply impaired by their dishonorable conduct, and when they surveyed the devastated, depopulated world at the end of the war, their victory seemed hollow. In contrast, many of the Kauravas seemed noble, exemplary warriors. When their

leader Duryodhana was killed in battle, his spirit ascended immediately to heaven and a shower of heavenly petals covered his corpse.

In some respects, the religious world of the *Mahabharata* seems untouched by the Axial Age. The epic reminds us that only an elite group was involved in the Great Transformation. Most people retained the older religious practices and—superficially, at least—appeared to have been unaffected by the new developments. Indra, for example, was still the most important god in the *Mahabharata*—he clearly remained popular among the *kshatriyas* long after he had faded from the sophisticated priestly speculations. In the epic, the cosmic events of the ancient Vedic myths were transposed into a historical setting: the war of the Pandavas and Kauravas replicated the wars between *devas* and *asuras*, and each of the Pandava brothers was the son and earthly counterpart of a Vedic god. The epic was based on the theology of the early Vedic period. A warrior who died in battle went straight to the world of the gods; there was no hint that he would have to return and suffer another death. There were no modern renouncers in the poem, but only old-fashioned hermits tending their sacrificial fires in the forest. There were a few yogins in the *Mahabharata*, but they were usually more interested in exploiting the magical potential of their enhanced mental powers than in suppressing their egos. The Axial Age had insisted on the personal responsibility of the individual, but in the epic the main characters had no choice at all, and were often compelled by the gods to act against their better judgment. The archaic spirit of the *Mahabharata* is particularly evident in its preoccupation with the ancient sacrificial lore. The five Pandava brothers, for example, were all married to their sister, Draupadi. This was clearly highly unconventional, but the marriage recalled the ancient ritual of the Asmavedya, the horse sacrifice, which bestowed sovereignty on the king: during the rite, the queen had some form of simulated sex with the sacrificial stallion, and was thus able to transmit the dominion it represented to her husband. In the epic, Draupadi represented royal authority, which she passed on to her brothers.

But the *Mahabharata* also reflects the terror inspired by the sac-

rificial contests, before they had been reformed by the ritualists. At the beginning of the story, Yudishthira, the oldest Pandava brother, having won the kingdom by force of arms, summoned the chieftains to his royal consecration (*rajasuya*). He had to prove that he possessed the brahman by submitting to the challenge and ordeal of the ritual. He was duly consecrated and anointed king, but the *rajasuya* had a disastrous outcome. Overcome with envy, Duryodhana challenged Yudishthira to the dice game that was mandatory during the rites, but the gods loaded the dice against Yudishthira, who lost his wife, his property, and his kingdom. The Pandavas were forced into exile for twelve years, and the war that would almost result in the destruction of the world became inevitable. The story's catastrophic view of the sacrificial contest gives us some insight into the anxiety that inspired the ritual reform of the *Brahmanas*.

The plight of Yudishthira shows that the *Mahabharata* was not, after all, untouched by the Axial Age. He seems to have been profoundly affected by the new ideals. He was—to the frequent exasperation of his brothers—gentle, tolerant, and singularly lacking in the warrior ethos. He not only had no desire to assert himself and trumpet his ego in the conventional way, but appeared to find it well-nigh impossible to do so and regarded war as evil, savage, and cruel.[63] Yudishthira was a man of the Axial Age, and this proved to be an almost intolerable handicap. He could not go off to the forest and practice *ahimsa*. He was the son of the god Dharma, a manifestation of Varuna, who upheld the order that made life possible. As his earthly representative, it was Yudishthira's inescapable duty to achieve the sovereignty that alone could bring order to the world. As the son of Dharma, he was also obliged to practice the traditional virtues of absolute truthfulness and fidelity to his sworn word, without which the social order could not be maintained. Yet during the war, Yudishthira was forced—quite disgracefully—to lie.

In the course of the eighteen-day battle, the Pandavas had to kill two of the generals fighting on the Kaurava side. As the epic was set in the heroic age, none of these men were ordinary mortals; they were demigods, with supernormal powers. When the

Pandavas rode into battle, for example, their chariots did not touch the earth. Warriors were not subject to the same constraints as the human beings of our own debased Kali Yuga; and Bhishma and Drona, who led the Kaurava troops, could not be killed by regular means. They had inflicted so many casualties on the Pandavas' army that the brothers despaired of victory. The future of the world hung in the balance, because if Yudishthira failed to achieve sovereignty, the divine order would be hopelessly violated. At this terrible moment, Krishna stepped in with advice that filled the brothers with dismay.

The Pandavas knew and respected the generals, who were men of outstanding courage and honor. When they were boys, Bhishma had initiated the Pandavas into the *kshatriya* code and the martial arts. He was a perfect warrior, famous for his scrupulous truthfulness. Drona had taught the Pandavas archery and chariot driving and, as a Brahmin, was a devoutly religious man. Neither would dream of lying or breaking an oath, and they would find it impossible to believe that Yudishthira, son of Dharma, would lie or try to exploit them. And yet this was what Krishna, in two successive councils of war, advised him to do. Yudishthira, he argued, must trap Bhishma into revealing, with his habitual scrupulous veracity, the only way that it was possible to kill him. And he must tell Drona a foul lie, informing him that his son Aswatthaman had been killed, so that, in the midst of the battle, Drona would lay down his weapons and make himself vulnerable to attack.

When Krishna outlined these stratagems in all their shabby detail, the Pandava brothers were horrified. Burning with grief and shame, Arjuna, the greatest warrior of them all, refused at first to take any part in Krishna's scheme. Krishna had told him that he would have to steal up on Bhishma, hiding behind another warrior, who, to add insult to injury, had been a woman in a past life! Arjuna was the son of Indra: How could he possibly behave in such a way? But Krishna pointed out that Arjuna had made a solemn vow to kill Bhishma, and this was the only way he could keep his word. How could the son of Indra break a sacred oath?[64]

When Bhishma was killed according to Krishna's plan, everybody behaved as nobly as they possibly could. Arjuna brought

water from the depths of the earth with one of his arrows, so that his old teacher could slake his thirst and bathe his wounds, and the dying Bhishma's body did not touch the ground; he remained in a state of heroic and moral elevation. But Drona's death irreparably damaged the Pandavas. Krishna told Arjuna that they had to "cast virtue aside," in order to save the world, and Yudishthira reluctantly and "with difficulty" promised to tell Drona his cruel lie.[65] "Untruth may be better than truth," Krishna argued. "By telling a lie to save life, untruth does not touch us."[66]

But despite Krishna's reassurance, Yudishthira was tarnished. His chariot had always floated the width of four fingers from the ground, but as soon as he told Drona that his son had been killed, it came sharply down to earth. Drona, however, died the holiest of deaths and was taken directly up to heaven. When Yudishthira told him that his son Aswatthaman was dead, Drona had at first continued to fight, but was persuaded to lay down his weapons by a group of *rishis* who appeared to him in a vision and warned him that he was about to die; as a Brahmin, he should not spend his last moments fighting. Immediately Drona laid down his arms, sat in his chariot in the yogic position, fell into a trance, and peacefully ascended to the world of the gods. The life had already left his body when he was beheaded by an ally of the Pandavas. The contrast of Yudishthira's fall from grace and Drona's ecstatic ascension was devastating in its implications. Arjuna bitterly berated Yudishthira: his vile lie would taint them all.[67]

What are we to make of Krishna's dubious role? He was not a Satan, tempting the Pandavas to sin. Like the brothers, he was also the son of one of the Vedic gods. His father was Vishnu, the guardian of sacrifice.[68] In the *Brahmanas*, Vishnu's task was to "repair" a sacrifice that had been spoiled by a mistake in the ritual, so that it could still perform its function and renew the cosmic order. In the *Mahabharata*, Krishna was Vishnu's earthly counterpart. As the heroic age drew to its violent close, order had to be restored by a massive sacrificial ritual. The battle was this sacrifice; its victims—the warriors who died during the fighting—would put history back on track, by returning the sovereignty to Yudishthira. But the war could not be won by ordinary means: Drona and

Bhishma, Krishna pointed out, were supermen who "could not have been slain in a fair fight."[69] His desperate stratagems were like the special ritual procedures employed by a priest to put the sacrifice back on course.

In terms of the old Vedic ethos, Krishna's argument was impeccable; he was even able to cite the precedent of Indra, who had resorted to a similar lie when he slew the monster Vritra and brought order out of chaos. But Yudishthira was a man of the Axial Age, and was not convinced by this archaic ritual lore. He was inconsolable. Throughout the poem, he persisted in his despairing cry: "Nothing is more evil than the kshatriya's *dharma*."[70] Warfare was not a blood sacrifice acceptable to the gods; it was an atrocity. The epic story showed that violence bred more violence, and that one dishonorable betrayal led to another.

Crazed with sorrow, Drona's son Aswatthaman vowed to avenge his father's death, and offered himself to Shiva, the ancient god of the indigenous people of India, as "self-sacrifice" (*atmayajna*). His martyrdom was a horrible parody of the nonviolent renunciation of self practiced by the renouncers. Shiva handed Aswatthaman a glittering sword, and took possession of his body, which now shone with unearthly radiance. In a divine frenzy, Aswatthaman entered the Pandavas' camp while everybody was asleep, and began to slaughter his enemies in a raid that was as dishonorable as Yudishthira's betrayal of his father. Aswatthaman was a Brahmin; he experienced the massacre as a holy ritual, but in fact it was a sacrifice that was out of control. In Vedic ritual, the animal was supposed to be killed swiftly and painlessly. But when Aswatthaman seized his first victim—the man who had decapitated his father—he kicked him to death, refusing to finish him quickly, and "made him die the death of an animal . . . grinding off his head."[71]

The Pandava brothers escaped the raid, because Krishna had advised them to sleep outside the camp that night, but most of their family—including the children—were slaughtered. When the Pandavas finally caught up with Aswatthaman, they found him sitting serenely beside the Ganges in a ritual garment, in classic

Brahminical pose, with a group of renouncers. As soon as he saw the Pandavas, Aswatthaman plucked a blade of grass and transformed it into a *brahmasiris*, a weapon of mass destruction, which he released with the cry "*Apandavaga!*"—"For the annihilation of the Pandavas!" There was an immediate fiery conflagration that threatened to engulf the world. In order to neutralize the effect of Aswatthaman's missile, Arjuna immediately fired off a *brahmasiris* of his own, and it too blazed up like the fire at the end of a yuga.[72] There was a deadly impasse, and yet again, the fate of the world was in the balance. But two of the renouncers with Aswatthaman positioned themselves between the contending weapons. In the Axial spirit—"desiring the welfare of all creatures and of all the worlds"—they asked both warriors to recall their missiles. Arjuna had observed the "holy life" of a warrior: he practiced a form of yoga, and carefully observed the sacred *kshatriya* virtues of truth and fidelity.[73] He could control his anger, and because he had not fired his weapon in wrath, he was able to recall it. Aswatthaman, however, had hurled his *brahmasiris* in rage. He could not restrain it but could only alter its course: the weapon would now go into the wombs of the Pandavas' wives; they would bear no more children, and the Pandava line would become extinct. Krishna cursed him: for three thousand years Aswatthaman must wander the earth alone, a renouncer manqué, living in the forests and uninhabited tracts of land.

Yudishthira ruled for fifteen years, but the light had gone from his life. He could never reconcile the *kshatriya*'s violent vocation with the dharma of *ahimsa* and compassion that he found in his heart. There are innumerable passages in the *Mahabharata* that defend the warrior's vocation and that exult in fighting and killing, but fundamental doubts remain. The epic shows the unsettling effect of the Axial spirituality on some of the laypeople in India, who felt thrust into a limbo. Trapped in a worldly dharma, they could not join the renouncers and yogins, but found that the old Vedic faith could no longer sustain them. Indeed, it sometimes seemed demonic: Aswatthaman's ecstatic "self-sacrifice" had almost destroyed the world. The story of his night raid—with its

execution of massacre, martyrdom, escalating retaliation, and the reckless firing of weapons—has almost prophetic resonance for us today. A destructive cycle of violence, betrayal, and economy with the truth could lead to tragic nihilism:

> The goddess Earth trembled and the mountains shook. The wind did not blow, nor did the fire, though kindled, blaze forth. And even the constellations in the sky, agitated, wandered about. The sun did not shine; the lunar disc lost its splendour. All confounded, space became covered with darkness. Then, overcome, the gods did not know their domains, the sacrifice did not shine forth, and the Vedas abandoned them.[74]

The only thing that had saved the world from destruction was the Axial spirit of the two sages, who desired "the welfare of all creatures and of all the worlds." Somehow this spirit had to become more accessible to the ordinary warrior and householder, some of whom were in danger of falling into despair.

When Socrates was put to death by the democracy of Athens in 399, his pupil Plato was thirty years old. The tragedy made an indelible impression on the young man and profoundly affected his philosophy.[75] Plato had hoped for a political career. Unlike his hero Socrates, he came from a rich, aristocratic family: his father was a descendant of the last king of Athens; his stepfather had been a close friend of Pericles; and two of his uncles had been active in the government of the thirty tyrants after Athens's defeat in the Peloponnesian War. They had invited Plato to join them. It seemed a great opportunity, but Plato could see the flaws of this disastrous administration. He was delighted when the democracy was restored, and believed that his time had come, but the trial and death of Socrates so shattered his hopes that he became disillusioned and withdrew from public life in disgust. Wherever he looked, in any polis, the system of government was bad:

> Hence I was forced to say . . . that the human race will not see better days until either the stock of those who rightly and genuinely follow philosophy acquire political authority, or else the class who have political control be led by some dispensation of providence to become real philosophers.[76]

How could the insights of the Axial Age be integrated into the violent and dishonest world of politics? Plato's philosophy often seems to be otherworldly and to involve a flight from the mundane to the cold purity of abstraction. Yet Plato did not want his philosophers to retire from the world. Like the Confucians, he believed that a sage should be a man of action and influence public policy. Ideally, a philosopher should rule the people himself. Like the Buddha, Plato insisted that after achieving enlightenment, the sage must return to the agora and work there for the betterment of humanity.

After the death of Socrates, Plato traveled in the eastern Mediterranean, hoping for inspiration. He stayed for some time in Megara with Euclides, one of the Eleatic philosophers who had been a disciple of Socrates; he shared Plato's fascination with Parmenides. Plato was also attracted by the Pythagorean communities, with whom he forged lifelong friendships. He was especially inspired by their passion for mathematics, which trained their minds away from the confusing morass of the particular to a world of pure numbers and geometric forms. He traveled in Egypt and Libya, and in the court of the tyrant Dionysius I of Syracuse, he met Dion, who became very enthusiastic about Plato's ideas. Plato may have hoped that Dion would become a philosophical activist in Sicily, but his first visit to Syracuse ended badly. It was said that Dionysius had Plato sold into slavery, and that he was rescued only at the last minute by his friends. Bruised by this experience, he returned home to Athens in 387.

There was little to cheer him there. Athens had tried to recover from the Peloponnesian War by making an alliance with Thebes against Sparta. But there was no lasting peace. The events of the next thirty years demonstrated the chronic instability of in-

tercity politics on the Greek mainland. The poleis continued to fight, no city was able to implement a coherent foreign policy, and all were debilitated by the ceaseless conflict; trade declined, and there was renewed conflict between rich and poor. These internal disputes sometimes exploded in atrocity. In 370, democrats in Argos brutally clubbed twelve hundred aristocrats to death, and in Tegea the leaders of the oligarchy were slaughtered by a violent mob.

Plato's response to this mayhem was to found a school of mathematics and philosophy. It was called the Academy, because the scholars met in a sacred grove on the outskirts of Athens dedicated to the hero Academius. Teaching was conducted by discussion in the Socratic manner rather than by lectures. Plato did not seek at this early stage to impose his own views on his pupils, but encouraged independent thinking. At the same time, he developed his personal ideas in writing and became the first philosopher whose oeuvre has survived in its entirety. He did not record his insights dogmatically, but used the dialogue form, in which different viewpoints were expressed. As Socrates was the hero of these dialogues, they arrived at no firm conclusions. Plato's dialogues were not definitive arguments but invitations to further thought that drew his readers into a deeper appreciation of the complexities of the issues discussed. Plato was not like a modern academic. Instead of expounding his ideas solemnly and logically, he often presented them playfully, indirectly, and allusively, speaking in parables and referring to fundamental truths elliptically and obscurely. He believed that the process of arriving at truth was hard, and required long, rigorous training in dialectic, but in his writing he also preserved the ancient methods of oral transmission, which recognized that truth could not be imparted by a simple recitation of facts, but demanded intuition, aesthetic insight, and imagination as well as empirical observation and disciplined logic.

Plato's philosophy is dominated by what is usually called the "doctrine of the forms," even though this never really became a consistent theory. Modern scholars have traced a development in his thought, and some believe that at the end of his life he aban-

doned the forms altogether, but it is a mistake to seek a clear intellectual evolution in Plato's work.[77] He probably started a new dialogue before finishing one that was already in progress, working on several at once. Sometimes he would try one approach, sometimes another; occasionally he described the forms mystically as divine figures; at other times he defined them more cerebrally. In each dialogue, he stole up on this difficult concept from a different starting point, so that what is preserved is a series of overlapping arguments that present a general idea of a form as an abstract object of thought by asking a number of different philosophical questions—but always trying to find out how this apparently abstruse notion had practical relevance in the unsettled and disturbing world of the fourth century.

Socrates had attempted to discover the true nature of goodness, but he does not seem to have formulated this in a way that satisfied anybody—perhaps not even himself. In the early dialogues, Plato probably stuck closely to his master's procedures. As we have seen, he made Socrates ask his interlocutors to consider different instances of a virtue such as courage, in the hope of finding a common denominator. If this type of behavior *was* brave and that was *not*, what did this tell us about the nature of courage per se? How could you behave virtuously if you did not know what virtue was? In the political turbulence of his time, in which the supporters of the competing polities—democracy, oligarchy, tyranny, aristocracy, monarchy—stridently argued their case, Plato believed that the only hope of achieving a solution was to find the underlying principles of good government. Like Socrates, Plato was disturbed by the relativism of the Sophists. He wanted to find a dimension of reality that was constant and unchanging but that could be grasped by a sustained effort of rational thought.

Yet Plato departed from Socrates by putting forward an extraordinary suggestion. Virtue, he argued, was not a concept that could be constructed by accumulating examples of behavior in daily life. It was an independent entity, an objective reality that existed on a higher plane than the material world. The ideas of goodness, justice, or beauty could not be experienced by the senses; we could not see, hear, or touch them, but they could be

comprehended by the power of reasoning that resided in the soul (*psyche*) of each human being. Everything in our material world had an eternal, unchanging form: courage, justice, largeness—even a table. If we stood on a riverbank, we recognized that the body of water in front of us was a river rather than a pond or an ocean because we had the form of a river in our minds. But this universal concept was not something that we had created for our own convenience. It existed in its own right. In this world, for example, no two things were truly equal, yet we had an idea of absolute equality, even though we had no experience of it in our everyday lives. "Things have some fixed being or essence of their own," Plato made Socrates say. "They are not in relation to us and are not made to fluctuate by how they appear to us. They are by themselves, in relation to their own being or essence, which is theirs by nature."[78]

The Greek word *idea* did not mean "idea" in the modern English sense. An *idea* or *eidos* was not a private, subjective mental construct, but a "form," "pattern," or "essence." A form or *idea* was an archetype, the original pattern that gave each particular entity its distinctive shape and condition. Plato's philosophical notion can be seen as a rationalized and internalized expression of the ancient perennial philosophy in which every earthly object or experience has its counterpart in the divine sphere.[79] This perception had been crucial to pre-Axial religion, so Plato's idea of a world of absolutes that were imperfectly represented in the mundane sphere would have seemed less strange to his contemporaries than to a modern reader. The forms manifested themselves in the world of time, but they were superior, numinous, and timeless. They gave shape to our lives but transcended them. Everything here below was constantly changing and decaying. Plato pointed out that even though a beautiful person lost her looks and died, beauty itself continued to exist. She had not possessed absolute beauty—no earthly entity does—but she was informed by beauty and participated in this eternal quality. Her beauty was very different from the beauty of her sister, or from the beauty of a poem, a mountain, or a building, but people recognized it because each of us had innate knowledge of the eternal forms. When we fell in

love with a beautiful person, we surrendered to the beauty that was revealed in her. The enlightened person will have trained him- or herself (Plato believed that women could enjoy this knowledge too) to see through the imperfect earthly manifestation of beauty to the eternal form that lay beneath it.

The realm of the forms was thus primary, and our material world was secondary and derivative, just as, in the perennial philosophy, the celestial sphere was superior and more enduring than the mundane. The forms had an intensity of reality that transitory phenomena could not possess. When we glimpsed the form that was imperfectly revealed in a person, an action, or an object, we saw its hidden essence and encountered a level of being that was more authentic than its earthly manifestation. Like Zhuangzi and the Buddha, Plato realized that everything that we saw here below was constantly becoming something else. The forms, however, were not involved in the flux of becoming. They were static, changeless, and immortal. The philosopher sought to encounter a deeper level of meaning by cultivating a knowledge that was based on the exercise of pure reason rather than sense data, which was always inherently unsatisfactory—or *dukkha*, as the Buddha would have said.

Plato may have harked back to an ancient mythical perception, but he was also inspired by the mathematics of his day. Inscribed over the door of the Academy was the motto "Let no one unacquainted with geometry enter here." Training in mathematics was essential. Like the Pythagoreans, Plato believed that the cosmos was ordered on the fundamental ideas of number and geometry. We never saw a perfect circle or triangle in natural objects, but these forms underlay all empirically observed objects. They were not, Plato believed, imposed by the ordering mind on the untidy world about us, but existed independently, transcending the intellect that perceived them. They were, therefore, *found*, and discovered not by ordinary modes of thought but by the trained intelligence. Mathematics exemplified the absolutely certain knowledge that Plato sought but that could not be derived from our ordinary experience.[80] Even today, mathematicians speak of their discipline in a Platonic way. "When one 'sees' a

mathematical truth," Roger Penrose has explained, "one's con-
sciousness breaks through into this world of ideas and makes con-
tact with it."[81]

But even though this knowledge could only be acquired painfully and laboriously, it was—Plato was convinced—an en-tirely natural human capacity. We were born with it. It simply had to be awakened. Truth was not introduced into the mind from outside but had to be "re-collected" from a prenatal existence when each man or woman had enjoyed direct knowledge of the forms. Each soul (*psyche*) had been born many times, Plato's Socrates explained, "and has seen all things here and in the under-world. There is nothing which it has not learned, so it is in no way surprising that it can recollect the things it knew before, both about virtue and other things . . . because searching and learning are, as a whole, recollection."[82] He illustrated his theory by sum-moning a slave boy to his side and helping him to find the solu-tion to a difficult geometrical problem, claiming that he had simply reminded the child of something that he had known in a previous existence but had forgotten.[83]

Plato shared the conviction of many Axial philosophers that there was a dimension of reality that transcended our normal ex-perience but that was accessible to us and natural to our human-ity. Yet where others believed that this insight could not be achieved by ratiocination, Plato believed that it could. But his in-sistence that knowledge was essentially recollection shows that this rigorous dialectic was not coldly analytic but intuitive; the re-covery of this innate knowledge seemed to take the mind itself by surprise. It is true that in some of the dialogues Plato simply made use of the forms to investigate a concept or get to the root of a problem.[84] But it is also true that Plato's rational quest was pas-sionate and romantic. In ancient Greece, reason was not "cold" but "hot," a spiritual quest for meaning and value.[85] It helped the *psyche* to identify its goals and harness its desires in order to attain them. Hitherto, as far as we can tell from the fragmentary texts that have survived, Greek philosophers had often confined them-selves to a notional, cerebral interpretation of experience. In the Academy, Greek education became more spiritual.

Frequently Plato used the imagery and vocabulary of the Eleusinian and Dionysian mysteries to describe the process of illumination and recollection. Instead of achieving insight through rituals and dramatic representations, however, his disciples reached their vision of the forms through the exercise of a dialectic that was so rigorous and exacting that it seems to have pushed them into an alternative state of consciousness. The process was described as a mystical ascent to a higher state of being, an initiation that was not wholly unlike that experienced by the *mystai* at Eleusis, which had introduced the aspirant to a blessed state. In the *Symposium*, Plato made Socrates describe the quest as a love affair that grasped the seeker's entire being, until he achieved an *ekstasis* that took him beyond normal perception. Socrates explained that he had received this information from a priestess called Diotima, who showed her *mystai* how their love of a beautiful body could be purified and transformed into an ecstatic contemplation (*theoria*) of ideal beauty. At first the philosophical initiate was simply enraptured by the physical perfection of his beloved; then he began to see that this person was just one manifestation of a beauty that existed in other beings too. In the next stage of his initiation, he realized that beauty of body was of a lesser order than the more elusive beauty of soul that could exist even in a physically ugly person. Finally, Diotima explained, "As he approaches the end of the initiation, there bursts upon him that wondrous vision, which is the very soul of the beauty he has toiled so long to find." This beauty was eternal; it could no longer be confined to a particular object, but was "absolute, existing alone with itself, unique, eternal." All other things participated in it, "yet in such a manner that, while they come into being and pass away, it neither undergoes any increase or diminution nor suffers any change." The *psyche* had been "initiated into the mysteries of love," had left the material world behind, and attained an ecstatic knowledge of absolute beauty itself.[86]

We moderns experience thinking as something that we *do*. But Plato envisaged it as something that happened to the mind: the objects of thought were living realities in the *psyche* of the person who learned to see them. This vision of beauty was not

merely an aesthetic experience. Once people had experienced it, they found that they had undergone a profound moral change and could no longer live in a shabby, unethical way. A person who had achieved this knowledge could "bring forth not mere reflected images of goodness, but true goodness, because he will be in contact not with a reflection but with the truth." He had undergone a fundamental transformation: "having brought forth and nurtured true goodness, he will have the privilege of being beloved of God, and becoming, if ever men can, immortal himself." Plato's description of beauty was clearly similar to what others called God or the Way:

> This Beauty will not appear to the imagination like the beauty of a face or hands or anything else corporeal, or like the beauty of a thought or science, or like beauty that has its seat in something other than itself, be it in a living thing or the earth or the sky or anything else whatsoever.

Like God, brahman, or *nibbana,* it was utterly transcendent: "absolute, existing alone within itself, unique, eternal."[88]

But the vision of beauty was not the end of the quest. It pointed inexorably toward the Good, the essence of everything that human beings desired. All the other forms were subsumed within the Good, and were nourished by it. In the Good, all things became one. The Good was indescribable and Plato's Socrates could speak of it only in parables, most memorably in the allegory of the cave in *The Republic.*[89] Here Socrates imagined a group of men who had been chained up all their lives like prisoners in a cave. They were turned away from the sunlight and could see only shadows reflected from the outside world onto the rocky wall. This was an image of the unenlightened human condition in which it was impossible to see the forms directly. We were so conditioned by our deprived circumstances that we took these ephemeral shadows for true reality. If we were liberated from this captivity we would be dazzled and bewildered by the brilliant sunlight and vibrant existence of the world outside the

cave. It would probably be too much for us, and we would want to go back to our familiar twilight existence.

So, Socrates explained, the ascent to the light must take place gradually. The sunlight symbolized the Good. Just as physical light enabled us to see clearly, so the Good was the source of true knowledge. When, like the liberated prisoners, we saw the Good, we perceived what was really there. The sun enabled things to grow and flourish; like the Good, it was the cause of being and thus lay beyond anything that we experienced in ordinary life. At the end of its long initiation, the illuminated soul would be able to see the Good as clearly as ordinary people see the sun. But even this was not the end of the journey. The liberated men probably wanted to stay outside and bask in the sunlight—just as the Buddha wanted to luxuriate in the peace of *nibbana*—but they had a duty to go back to the darkness of the cave to help their comrades. "Therefore each of you in turn must go down to live in the common dwelling place of the others," Socrates insisted. "You'll see vastly better than the people there. And because you've seen the truth about fine, just, and good things, you'll know each image for what it is."[90] They would probably get a hostile reception. They would now be bewildered by the darkness; their former companions might laugh at them and tell them that they were deluded. How could an enlightened man "compete again with the perpetual prisoners in recognizing the shadows"?[91] The captives might even turn on their liberators and kill them, just as, Plato implied, the Athenians had executed the historical Socrates.

The parable of the cave was an integral part of Plato's political description of the ideal republic. He always came back to the practical application of his ideals, and the shadows on the wall, besides depicting the impoverished vision of the unenlightened, also expressed the ephemeral illusions of contemporary politics, which relied on coercion and self-serving fantasies. In *The Republic,* Plato wanted to show that justice was rational, and that people could live in the way that they should only if they were brought up in a decent society, where the rulers were governed by reason. There is much in this text that is distasteful and elitist. There would, for example, be genetic engineering in Plato's utopian city; less able cit-

[illegible] would be discouraged from procreation; defective infants would be discreetly disposed of, and the more promising taken from their parents and brought up in state nurseries in a separate sector of the polis. The most gifted would be subjected to a long arduous education, which would culminate in their ascent from the cave. At the end of their initiation into enlightened civic life, they would see the Good for themselves and thereby attain an inner stability that would bring peace and justice to the public.

> Thus, for you and for us, the city will be governed, not like the majority of cities nowadays, by people who fight over shadows and struggle against one another in order to rule—as if that were a great good—but by people who are awake rather than dreaming, for the truth is surely this: A city whose prospective rulers are least eager to rule must of necessity be most free from civil war.[92]

Plato almost certainly did not regard his imaginary republic as a blueprint for an actual state and probably used it simply to stimulate discussion, but the inherent cruelty of his utopia departed from the compassionate ethos of the Axial Age.

The Republic was authoritarian. It imposed its vision on others—an expedient that the Buddha, for example, would have found "unskillful." Plato had no time for the humanities. He looked askance at traditional Greek education, with its emphasis on poetry and music, because he believed that the arts aroused irrational emotion. Plato's republic would not encourage personal relationships: sex was simply a means to the end of breeding genetically acceptable citizens. And Plato wanted to ban tragedy from his ideal polis. In the fourth century, new tragedies continued to attract large audiences from all over Attica,[93] but Athenians looked back with nostalgia to the great days of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides and still hankered after their tragic insight.[94] But Plato turned his back on tragedy. He distrusted its pessimism, its negative appraisal of human potential, and believed that its skeptical

view of the gods could induce a fatal nihilism. To sympathize with the tragic heroes was implicitly to condone their bleak valuation of life, and thus to encourage inconsolable grief and ungovernable rage. Tragedy had the power to "maim" even the souls of the virtuous citizens and make the lives of those exposed to it "worse and more wretched." Above all, tragedy tapped a natural tendency to sorrow and could inspire an "emotional surrender."[95] Grief for oneself and pity for others must be controlled and held in check. Indeed, to sympathize with others and share their suffering, as the chorus directed the audience to do, dangerously undermined the moderation and self-control of the good man. Society must take active measures to repress this natural sympathy, since it was incompatible with virtue.[96]

Instead of cultivating the "shoots" of compassion, like Mencius, Plato wanted to eliminate it. In his later work, we see a harshness that could have been accentuated by his second Sicilian adventure. After the death of the tyrant Dionysius I of Syracuse, Plato unwisely became involved in the political conspiracy that led to the assassination of his old protégé Dion in 354. At one point, Plato was put under house arrest and narrowly escaped execution. Not only had his philosophical ideas proved wholly ineffective, but he himself was personally scarred, and from this time forward he took a harder line.

Plato's vision of the forms had introduced a new dynamic into Greek religion. Since Homer, Greeks had been encouraged to accept reality as it was, and had no ambition to transcend it or radically change their condition. Poets, scientists, and tragedians had insisted that existence was transitory, moribund, and often cruelly destructive. Human life was *dukkha;* not even the gods could change this unsatisfactory state of affairs. This was the true reality, and a mature human must face up to it, either with heroic defiance or with tragic or philosophical insight. Plato reversed this. Our earthly, corporeal life was indeed miserable and awry, but it was *not* the true reality. It was *un*real, compared with the immutable, eternal world of the forms, and this perfect world was accessible to human beings. People did not have to put up with suffering and death. If they were prepared to devote themselves to

a long, exacting philosophical initiation, their souls could ascend to the divine world without any help from the gods and achieve an immortality that had once been the prerogative of the Olympians. After Plato there was a yearning for an ineffable reality that existed beyond the gods.

In his later years, however, Plato turned back to the world and his theology became more concrete. In *Timaeus*, Plato suggested that the world had been created by a divine craftsman (*demiourgos*), who was eternal and wholly good but not omnipotent; he was not free to fashion the cosmos as he chose but had to model his creation upon the forms. The craftsman was not a figure that could inspire a religious quest, because he had no interest in humanity. He was not the Supreme God: a higher god existed, but he was also irrelevant to the human predicament. "To find the maker and father of this universe is hard enough," Plato remarked, "and even if I succeeded, to declare him to everyone is impossible."[97] Plato's aim was not religious. He simply wanted to devise a rational cosmology. Created according to the forms, imbued with reason, his universe had an intelligible pattern that could be investigated empirically. There would be no more arbitrary Olympian interventions. The cosmos was ruled by a comprehensive plan, which men could understand if they applied themselves to it logically.

Indeed, the cosmos thus created was itself a living being, with a rational mind (*nous*) and soul (*psyche*), which could be discerned in the mathematical proportions of the universe and the regular revolutions of the heavenly bodies. The stars themselves participated in the divinity of the creator; they were "visible and generated gods," and Gaia, the Earth, was "the foremost, the one with greatest seniority"; she too had been created according to the perfect model.[98] In the same way, the *nous* of each human being was divine; each had a *daimon*, a divine spark, within him- or herself, whose purpose was to "raise us up away from the earth and toward what is akin to us in heaven."[99] Human beings therefore lived in a perfectly rational world, the exploration of which was both a scientific and a spiritual enterprise. Plato had devised a new cosmic religion, which superseded the old Olympian vi-

sion and became the faith of the enlightened philosopher. It was accepted—though interpreted differently—by all Plato's pupils, and would, once merged with the monotheistic vision, remain the basic cosmological vision of Western Europe until the twelfth century CE.

Plato's sacred universe was an inspiration to philosophers; it encouraged them to investigate the cosmos empirically and to believe that it was possible to solve the mysteries of nature. It assured them that their minds, which contained a trace of the sacred, were equipped for the task. It also brought the divine into a human frame and made it perceptible. It was possible to actually see the gods—the sun, moon, and stars—every day, shining in the sky. When they investigated the earth, scientifically, they were delving into the mystery of the divine. But Plato's cosmic religion meant nothing to ordinary people who had no philosophical training. A deity who was uninterested in the human race could not give meaning to their lives. Plato tried to remedy this. The Olympian gods and heroes were now regarded as *daimones,* lesser deities who acted as tutelary spirits and carried messages to and from the ineffable celestial world. Nobody could ever have any intercourse with the supremely incomprehensible God, but they could revere Zeus, the guardian of city boundaries who took care of strangers; Hera, the patron of marriage; and Athena and Ares, who looked after hoplites during a campaign.[100] The Olympians had been reduced to guardian angels,* similar to the nature spirits who were being phased out of the Axial religions.

The Olympians may have lost status, but Plato insisted that their cult was essential to the polis. In *The Laws,* his last work, Plato described another utopian polis in which the old worship remained important. He denied that there was any conflict between reason and traditional Greek piety. There were no compelling proofs for the existence of the Olympian *daimones,* but it was irrational and unintelligent to deny the ancient myths, because like fairy tales, they contained a modicum of truth. Plato

*The Greek *aggelos* and Latin *angelus* meant "messenger," ministering spirit, a spiritual being superior to humans, who were the attendants of the deity.

wanted to reform the cult. He insisted that the Olympians could not be influenced by sacrifice or prayer, but that people should express their gratitude to these intermediaries with the ineffable, divine world.[101] Hester, Zeus, and Athena must have their shrines on the acropolis of his ideal city. Its agora would be surrounded by temples, and the festivals, processions, sacrifices, and prayers must all be carried out punctiliously. The most important deities of his imaginary city were Apollo and Helios, who had long been identified with the sun, and could easily be integrated with Plato's cosmic theology. Plato tried to merge old and new. During the festivals of his polis, gods and *daimones* would dance unseen beside the human celebrants. Indeed, the purpose of these rituals was precisely "to share [the gods'] holidays."[102] The festival involved an *agazein*, a word used to describe the ecstatic mystery celebrations.[103] The sacrifices could not propitiate the Olympians, but they could still lift the spirit and give humans intimations of transcendence. Nevertheless, despite Plato's approval of the old religion, he considered it inferior to philosophy. It could not bring true enlightenment: the forms could only be apprehended through the reasoning powers of the mind, not in the insights of myth or the sacred drama of ritual. Traditional religion had been downgraded; *mythos* had become subservient to Plato's mystical *logos*.

There was a sinister directive in *The Laws* that took Plato even further away from the Axial Age.[104] His imaginary city was a theocracy. The first duty of the polis was to inculcate "the right thoughts about the gods, and then to live accordingly: well or not well."[105] Correct belief came first; ethical behavior only second. Orthodox theology was the essential prerequisite for morality. "No one who believes in gods as the law directs ever voluntarily commits an unholy act or lets any lawless word pass his lips."[106] None of the Axial thinkers had placed any great emphasis on metaphysics. Some even regarded this type of speculation as misguided. Ethical action came first; compassionate action, not orthodoxy, enabled human beings to apprehend the sacred. But for Plato, correct belief was mandatory, so important that a "nocturnal council" must supervise the citizens' theological opinions.

There were three obligatory articles of faith: that the gods existed; that they cared for human beings; and that they could not be influenced by sacrifice and prayer. Atheism and a superstitious belief in the practical efficacy of ritual would be capital crimes in Plato's ideal polis, because these ideas could damage the state. Citizens would not be permitted either to doubt the existence of the Olympian gods or to ask searching questions about them. Poets could use their fables to instruct the masses, but their stories must not be too fanciful. They must focus on the importance of justice, the transmigration of souls, and the punishments that would be inflicted on wrongdoers in the afterlife. These doctrines could thus guarantee the good behavior of the uneducated. Plato was aware that some atheists lived exemplary lives, so he allowed a convicted unbeliever five years to find his way back to the fold. During this time, he would be detained in a sequestered place for reflection. If he still refused to submit to the true faith, he would be executed.[107]

At the beginning of his philosophical quest, Plato had been horrified by the execution of Socrates, who had been put to death for teaching false religious ideas. At the end of his life, he advocated the death penalty for those who did not share his views. Plato's vision had soured. It had become coercive, intolerant, and punitive. He sought to impose virtue from without, distrusted the compassionate impulse, and made his philosophical religion wholly intellectual. The Axial Age in Greece would make marvelous contributions to mathematics, dialectics, medicine, and science, but it was moving away from spirituality.

Plato's most brilliant pupil made this divide even more absolute. Aristotle (c. 384–322) was not a native Athenian. He came from a Greek colony on the peninsula of Chalcidice. His father was the friend and physician of King Amyntas II of Macedon, and Aristotle grew up with Amyntas's son Philip. At the age of eighteen, however, Aristotle arrived in Athens, and for twenty years he studied under Plato at the Academy. During this period of his life, he was a loyal disciple of Plato and accepted his theory of the forms. But over time, he became convinced that the forms had no independent, objective existence. Qualities such as beauty, courage,

roundness, or whiteness existed only in the material objects in which they inhered. Aristotle became extremely critical of the notion that the ideal world was more real than the material universe. Some substances were indeed eternal, divine, and superior to perishable objects, but it was very difficult to gain any accurate knowledge about them, because they existed beyond the reach of our senses. It was better to concentrate on what lay within our grasp, such as the structure of plants and animals.

When Plato died in 347, Aristotle left Athens. He may have been disappointed not to have been appointed head of the Academy; but he may also have become persona non grata in Athens because of his Macedonian connections. His friend Philip had succeeded his father in 360. A soldier and politician of genius, he had made the failing, backward, and isolated state of Macedonia a major power in the region, so that it now threatened Athenian interests. After a series of military defeats, Athens was forced to sign a treaty with Macedonia in 346, but remained hostile to and resentful of this dynamic new state, which was steadily expanding its territory and encroaching onto the mainland.

In 342, Philip invited Aristotle to take up residence in Macedonia and educate his son Alexander. Aristotle remained Alexander's tutor for at least three years, by which time Philip had become master of Greece, and after inflicting a decisive defeat on Athens in 338, he brought a new stability to the region. All the poleis benefited from the more peaceful conditions, and Athens in particular enjoyed a new period of prosperity. Philip had planned to invade Persia, but was assassinated in 336 and succeeded by his son Alexander. The following year, Aristotle returned to Athens and established his own school, known as the Lyceum because it was close to the temple of Apollo Lyceus.

By this time he had become a biologist. He had spent some years in Asia Minor dissecting animals and plants and writing detailed descriptions of his investigations. Aristotle brought philosophy down to earth. He had become especially interested in the process of development and decay: he once broke an egg every day to chart the growth of the chick embryo. Where Plato and

other Axial sages had been disturbed by flux and mutability, Aristotle was simply intrigued by the whole process of "becoming." Change was not *dukkha;* it was natural to all living beings. Instead of seeking meaning in the immaterial world, Aristotle found it in the physical forms of transformation. For him, a "form" was not an eternal reality beyond the realm of the senses. It was an immanent structure within each substance that controlled its evolution until it attained maturity. Each person or thing had a *dynamis* that impelled it to grow into its form, as the acorn contained within itself the "potential" to become an oak tree. Change was not to be feared but celebrated; it represented a universal striving for fulfillment.

But this was a purely earthly achievement. Aristotle had no ambition to leave Plato's cave. There was much beauty to be found in the phenomenal world, if a philosopher knew how to use his reason. After his return to Athens, Aristotle began to turn his attention to metaphysical and ethical subjects, but his focus remained fixed steadfastly upon the faculty and exercise of reason. Aristotle was a man of *logos.* What distinguished the human being from other animals was the ability to think rationally. Every creature strained to achieve the form within it. *Theoria,* the pursuit of truth for its own sake, was the final "form" or goal of man (Aristotle had little opinion of the female, which he saw as a defective form of humanity). The *eudaimonia* ("well-being") of man, therefore, lay in his intelligence. His "good" consisted of thinking clearly and effectively, planning, calculating, studying, and working things out. A man's moral well-being also depended upon *logos,* because such qualities as courage or generosity had to be regulated by reason. "The life according to reason is best and pleasantest," he wrote in one of his later treatises, "since reason, more than anything else, *is* man."[108] A man's intelligence (*nous*) was divine and immortal; it linked him with the gods, and gave him the ability to grasp ultimate truth. Unlike sensual delight, the pleasures of *theoria* did not ebb and flow, but were a continuous joy, giving the thinker that self-sufficiency that characterized the highest life of all. We, "must, in so far as we can, strain every nerve

to live in accordance with the best thing in us," Aristotle insisted. We could not, like the gods, completely immerse ourselves in intellectual contemplation, but when we did, we activated a divine principle within. A man could only reach toward this divine attribute "in so far as something divine is present in him."[109]

In some respects, *theoria* was similar to the tranced states achieved by some of the other Axial sages, who were also seeking to fulfill their human potential, looking for a joy that did not come or wane, and for absolute self-sufficiency. But they had tried to go beyond reason and *logos*. We do not know what Aristotle's *theoria* involved.[110] Did he include his scientific studies? Or was he engaged in a more meditative, transcendental activity? Certainly *noesis* (*"thought"*) was for Aristotle the highest form of being. *Noesis noeseos* (*"thinking about thinking"*) was being itself; it was the origin of all things and characterized the hidden life of God.

Like Plato, Aristotle believed that *theologia,* the study of God, was the "first philosophy" because it was concerned with the highest cause of being. He fully accepted Plato's cosmic religion, seeing the universe as divine, the stars as living gods, and imagining a supreme being that existed beyond the divine craftsman and his creation. Aristotle's God was not the first cause, because the universe was divine and eternal. Instead, he saw God as the Unmoved Mover. He noticed that everything that moved had been activated by something else. What had set the stars and the other heavenly bodies on their unchanging revolutions around the earth? Whatever had started them off must itself be immobile, or we would have to postulate a still higher being to initiate this action too. Reason demanded that the chain of cause and effect must have a single starting point. Aristotle's God was, therefore, the logical consequence of his cosmology rather than a mystically intuited reality. In the animal kingdom, he argued, desire could inspire movement. A hungry lion stalked a lamb because of his longing to eat. It followed that the stars might also have been set in motion by desire. They were themselves so perfect that they could yearn only toward a greater perfection, compelled by an intellectual love for a being engaged in the supreme activity. Aristotle's God was *noesis noeseos,* lost in contemplation of itself.

Hence Aristotle's Unmoved Mover was eternal; it was the supreme form, because it was the only form to exist apart from matter. As the highest divinity, it was pure *nous*, self-absorbed and self-sufficient, because it could take no heed of anything inferior to itself. God was pure *theoria*. Again, as in Plato's theology, there was nothing here for the ordinary person.[111] Not only was the Unmoved Mover unconcerned with the human race, but Aristotle also cast doubt on the idea that the lesser Olympians had any interest in humanity. For Plato, the Olympians' involvement in human affairs was an article of faith; for Aristotle, it was merely a hypothesis.[112] Yet, like Plato, Aristotle did not want to abolish the traditional cult. People always yearned toward superior beings. It was natural for them to honor the gods, and this type of worship should be accepted as a matter of fact. The old myths were highly suspect, but they probably contained a few fossils of ancient wisdom, such as ascribing divinity to the heavenly bodies. Religion could also be useful in giving a divine sanction to the laws and rulings of the polis.[113]

Philosophy had produced a new God, but it had nothing in common with Yahweh. Aristotle would have found the idea of a supreme deity who suddenly decided to create the world and involved himself in human history completely ludicrous. Even though monotheists would later use Aristotle's dubious "proofs" for the Unmoved Mover to demonstrate the existence of their God, the God of the philosophers was eventually regarded by the more discerning as *deus otiosus,* and useless to the spiritual quest.[114] Aristotle would have agreed. There was nothing sacred about his metaphysics. The term itself was coined by editors and librarians who put together his fragmentary writings and lecture notes. They simply combined fourteen essays on unrelated topics into a single volume, which they labeled *meta ta physika:* "After *The Physics.*"

In some respects, Aristotle seems to have had a better understanding of traditional spirituality than Plato. He was not preoccupied with orthodoxy, pointing out that the initiates who took part in the mysteries did not do so to learn facts and doctrines but to "experience certain emotions and to be put in a certain disposi-

tion."[115] This type of religion was about feeling (*pathein*), not thinking. Aristotle seemed more comfortable with emotion than Plato. It was, for example, sometimes good to be angry, as long as you did not allow your wrath to become extreme. Where Plato would have banned tragedy from his ideal republic, Aristotle believed that it still had a function. It was right to feel pity and fear on some occasions, and tragedy helped to educate the emotions and teach people to experience them appropriately.[116] When observing the sufferings of Oedipus, for example, a pusillanimous man would realize that his troubles were not so bad after all, and an arrogant person would learn to feel compassion for those weaker than he. By imitating serious and terrible events, tragedy accomplished the purification of such feelings.[117] The emotions were drained of their dangerous potential and became beneficial to the individual and the community. Indeed, these feelings were essential to the peculiar pleasure of tragedy. Aristotle understood rationally what ritualists had always intuited: a symbolic, mythical, or ritual reenactment of events that would be unendurable in daily life could transform our deepest fears into something pure, transcendent, and even pleasurable. And yet Aristotle saw the tragedies as literary texts for private perusal. In his discussion of tragedy, he stressed its effect on the individual rather than its civic, political function. He did not discuss its ritual dimension and showed scant interest in the gods. His literary criticism was anthropocentric and, like his philosophy, was wholly oriented to the mundane world. What had been a profound religious experience was being subtly altered by Aristotle's rational intelligence into something more pragmatic.

Aristotle was a pioneer of great genius. Almost single-handedly he had laid the foundations of Western science, logic, and philosophy. Unfortunately, he also made an indelible impression on Western Christianity. Ever since Europeans discovered his writings in the twelfth century CE, many became enamored of his rational proofs for the Unmoved Mover—actually one of his less inspired achievements. Aristotle's God, which was not meant to be a religious value, was foreign to the main thrust of the Axial Age,

which had insisted that the ultimate reality was ineffable, indescribable, and incomprehensible—and yet something that human beings *could* experience, though not by reason. But Aristotle had set the West on its scientific course, which would, nearly two thousand years after the first Axial Age, introduce a second Great Transformation.

9

EMPIRE

(c. 300 to 220 BCE)

At the beginning of the third century, the Axial Age, which was coming to an end in the other regions, was still flourishing in China, but even here some of the original ideals were hardening. For generations, Wei and Qin had been the most powerful kingdoms in the region. In a desperate struggle for survival, the smaller states had veered in their support from one to the other, but people were becoming weary of the endless strife. Many longed for a ruler who was powerful enough to create a united Chinese empire, as in the days of Yao and Shun. There was an almost palpable longing for peace. The Chinese were not interested in the scientific, metaphysical, and logical questions that fascinated the Greeks. The political situation was so grave that such issues seemed trivial. Their priority was to bring back law and order, and to that end Chinese philosophers, moralists, and mystics concentrated on solving the problems of government. By this time, it was clear that a new approach was necessary. Change was accelerating at such a rate that people could see major differences occurring between one generation and the next. There was a growing conviction that if a new empire did emerge from the chaos of the Warring States period, it could not be run like the archaic empire of Yao and Shun—or even the early Zhou. In the larger, constantly expanding kingdoms, the princes no longer relied on the magical potency (*daode*) of their office. They were realists, and could see that the economy was the key to success.

Victory would go to the ruler who had the largest territory, the greatest manpower, the most extensive resources, and the best grain reserves.

By the end of the fourth century, the rulers had abandoned even the pretense of listening to Confucian and Mohist advisers. Instead they turned to men from the new merchant class, who shared their hard-nosed realism. The merchants depended upon calculation and the laws of finance; instead of contemplating the Way, they speculated on the desire for gain and luxury and thought in terms of money and written contracts. But another philosophical school was also coming to the fore. In one state after another, rulers were turning to the political scientists, the "men of method." The Chinese historians referred to them collectively as the Fajia, often translated as "School of Law."[1] But this can be misleading. The men of method were certainly interested in law, but they were not preoccupied by jurisprudence. *Fa* meant "standard, model." It was used to describe a tool, such as a plumb line or a carpenter's square, that reshaped raw materials so that they conformed to a fixed pattern.[2] The Legalists wanted to make people adapt to their ideal, so they extended the word to include prescriptive methods of controlling social behavior. *Fa* was, therefore, often paired with *xing* ("punishment"). The state, they argued, must impose severe penalties to reform men and women, in the same way that an L-square forced irregular material into line. Mohists and Confucians believed that only a sage king who was imbued with benevolence and morality could reform society. The Legalists were not interested in a prince's morality; they believed that, if properly formulated, their method would work automatically, provided that it was backed up by draconian punishments and a rigorous penal code.

The men of method had probably always been active in government circles. Even in the idealized feudal days, there must always have been a measure of coercion in politics. But times had changed. During the last century, there had been a huge population explosion in the great plain; and because of the ceaseless wars of expansion, states were becoming much bigger than the little feudal principalities had ever been. A prince needed more than *ren*

and ritual to govern these enormous kingdoms. The Legalists wanted to create a polity that would actually work. They did not see history as a lamentable decline from a golden age. This could only lead to nostalgia for the past, whereas salvation must lie in a rational appraisal of the present. Successful states, such as Wei and Qin, which were constantly expanding and having, therefore, to impose their rule on resentful, vanquished people, needed an efficient method of administration that did not rely on the ruler's charisma but would apply to all subjects alike, rich and poor, Chinese or barbarian.

The Legalists liked to compare the mechanism of the law to a pair of scales, which provided a standard measurement. Merchants and shopkeepers might want to extort more money from their customers, but the scales told them exactly how much they could charge. "Men don't try to change the scales because they know it would be useless," wrote a fourth century author.

> So when there is a clear-sighted ruler on the throne, officials have no opportunity to bend the law, magistrates have no opportunity to practise partiality. The people know that it would be useless to try to influence the magistrates; the scales stand level and correct, waiting for the load. So traitors and tricksters have no opportunity to get decisions partial to themselves.[3]

Once it had been set up, their political theory would work just as automatically and impartially. The Legalists had made the important intellectual transition from the person-to-person government of feudalism to an objective legal system, which was not unlike the concept of law in the modern West, except that in ancient China the law was not designed to protect the individual but to achieve control from above. The intellectual or moral status of the ruler was irrelevant, because the system could function without his personal intervention. He could—and should—sit back and "do nothing" (*wu wei*).

Strangely enough, Legalists felt an affinity with the Daoists, people like Zhuangzi, who had also taught the importance of

"doing nothing" and insisted that the Way of Heaven operated independently of human intentions. The early Legalists agreed. Thus Shen Dao, who was a contemporary of Mencius at the Jixia Academy, had compared the impersonal institutions of authority in the well-ordered state to the activity of the Way of Heaven, which could not be affected by the desires and dispositions of individual human beings. Just as the sage refrained from purposeful activity (*yu wei*) because it blocked the workings of the Way, so the king must refrain from any personal interventions that impeded the mechanical working of the system. Shen Dao wanted to find an ideological context for his wholly pragmatic vision of government, and the Legalist ideal of the passive, inactive king had deep roots in China. The ritual law of the feudal period had also ruled that the prince must "do nothing" but must simply allow the magical power of the Way to work through him.

Legalism first developed in the kingdoms of Wei, Han, and Zhao, which had broken away from the old state of Jin in the early fifth century. These were rogue states, and their rulers were, therefore, less wedded to tradition and more open to radical theories of government. In about 370, an ambitious young man called Shang Yang (c. 390–338) had settled in Wei and joined the discussions of the local political scientists, who had no grand spiritual program but simply wanted to reform the military, increase agricultural production, bolster the power of the ruler by weakening the local nobility, and develop a clear and effective legal code. Shang failed to gain the favor of the king of Wei, but in 361 managed to become chief adviser to the prince of Qin. This was a great opportunity. Qin had a large barbarian population, which knew next to nothing about Zhou traditions, and the nobility was too weak and impoverished to put up any effective opposition to Shang's revolutionary program. His reform, which flouted many of the major principles of the Axial Age, made the backward, isolated kingdom of Qin the most powerful and advanced state in China. At the end of the third century, as a result of Shang's far-reaching measures, Qin would conquer all the other states, and in 221 its ruler would become the first historical emperor of China.

Lord Shang felt no loyalty to past tradition. "When the guid-

[illegible] principles of the people become unsuited to their circum-
stances," he argued, "their standard [*fa*] of value must change. As
conditions in the world change, different principles are prac-
tical." It was no use dreaming of a golden age of compassionate
sage kings. If people were more generous in the past, this was now
because they had practiced *ren*, but because the population was
smaller and there was enough food to go round. Similarly, the con-
fusion and conflict of the Warring States period was not the re-
sult of dishonesty, but occurred simply because resources were
scarce. Instead of promoting nonviolence, Lord Shang wanted
the people of Qin to be as eager for war and bloodshed as a hun-
gry wolf. He had only one objective: "the enrichment of the state
and the strengthening of its military capacity."[6] To meet its targets,
governments had to exploit the fear and greed of the population.
Very few people wanted to expose themselves to the perils of
modern warfare, but Shang devised such dire punishments for de-
serters that death on the battlefield seemed preferable. He also re-
warded the outstanding military service of peasants and noblemen
alike with a grant of agricultural land.

Lord Shang's methodical, rational reform completely trans-
formed daily life in Qin, which under his tutelage became a
deadly efficient fighting machine. Conscription in the army and
the corvée was compulsory, and the harsh discipline of army life
was imposed on the whole country. Lord Shang's most important
innovation was to link agricultural production with the military.
Successful peasant-soldiers became landowners and were given ti-
tles and pensions, while the old nobility was dismantled. Aristo-
crats who did not perform well on the battlefield were demoted
and became commoners; those who did not participate efficiently
in Shang's ambitious land-clearance schemes were sold into slav-
ery. Everybody was subject to the same laws: even the crown
prince was executed when found guilty of a minor offense.

Not only was Lord Shang unconcerned about the morality of
the prince; he believed that a virtuous sage would make a disas-
trous king. "A state that uses good people to govern the wicked
will be plagued by disorder and destroyed," he declared. "A state
that uses the wicked to govern the good always enjoys order and

becomes strong. Confucians, who preached peace, were dangerous. If everybody practiced the *li*, they would become so moderate and restrained that a prince would never persuade anybody to fight. Lord Shang was openly contemptuous of the Golden Rule. A truly effective prince would inflict upon the enemy exactly what he would *not* wish to have done to his own troops. "If in war you perform what the enemy would not venture to perform, you will be strong," he told his officials. "If in enterprises you undertake what the enemy would be ashamed to do, you have the advantage."[8]

His draconian reforms were a great success. In 340, Qin inflicted a massive defeat on Wei, its major rival, and became a major contender for imperial power. Lord Shang had expected to receive a generous gift of land as a reward for his services, but instead he became a victim of the new ruthlessness. In 338, after the death of his royal patron, his rivals got the ear of the new prince, and Shang was ripped to pieces by the war chariots he had procured for Qin. But a new generation of Legalists would continue along the lines that he had mapped out, and other states began to follow Qin's example.

One of the finest Legalist scholars was Han Fei (280–233), who became a minister of King Huang-Di of Qin. He was far less cynical than Lord Shang and believed that he had a noble mission to help humanity. In his essay "Solitary Indignation," he saw himself as quite different from the other wandering *shi* who peddled what in his view were useless, impractical ideas. He and the other Legalists should be men of unimpeachable morality, and must dedicate themselves unswervingly to the highest interests of the prince.[9] Han Fei knew that it was highly unlikely that a king would be a paragon of virtue, but he wanted to help an ordinary human being to become an effective ruler by setting up an efficient system. The ruler must find the right officials to work for him, and should be inspired by the desire to help his people. "He simply looks ahead for what will benefit the people. Therefore, when he imposes punishments on them, it is not out of hatred of the people, but he does so simply out of concern for them."[10] He should be impartial and unselfish, punishing friends and family if

necessary and rewarding his enemies. A poem attributed to Han Fei gave the ruler's *wu wei* almost mystical significance:

By doing without knowledge, he possesses clear-sightedness,
By doing without worthiness, he gets results,
By doing without courage, he achieves strength."

The law was not supposed to be a method of punishment and suppression. It was an education that would accustom king and subjects to behave in a different way. Once this reformation was complete, there would be no further need for punishments; everybody would act in accordance with the best interests of the state. Yet for all his good intentions, Han Fei also suffered a violent end: he was slandered and imprisoned, and in 233, rather than submit to execution, accepted the option of committing suicide.

Before he had become a Legalist, Han Fei had studied under the most distinguished Confucian philosopher of his time and probably acquired much of his idealism from his teacher. Xunzi (c. 340–245), a passionate, poetic, yet rigorously rational thinker, managed to absorb insights of other philosophers into his own Confucian perspective and created a powerful synthesis.[12] He did not think that Mohists, Yangists, and Legalists were wrong; they simply stressed only one side of a complex argument, and it was possible to learn something from them all. Xunzi was also profoundly influenced by Daoist ideas. His book was more cogently argued and organized than any other text of Axial Age China, yet at times his prose modulated easily into poetry and his logic into mystical insight.

Xunzi was appalled by the new pragmatism, which he believed had led to a decline in moral standards. Everywhere he went he saw "scheming and plotting," and the selfish pursuit of wealth, power, and luxury.[13] Because princes refused to allow themselves to be restrained by the *li*, they pursued their own ambitions ruthlessly, and violence and warfare became endemic. Xunzi did not accept the realism of the Legalists; he still believed that a compassionate king was the only person who could restore peace and order, but he was prepared to consider any system that